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THE GIRL STORM-PILOT.



"SHIP AHOY! IF YOU WANT A PILOT, LAY TO, SO I CAN COME ABOARD."

Review

The Girl Storm-Pilot;

OR,
The Death-Bell of the Reefs.

A Romance of Sea, Coast, and
Iniquitous Imposture.

BY G. WALDO BROWNE.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE MEETING.

"WHIP-POOR-WILL! Whip-poor-will! WHIP-POOR-WILL!"

Above the sullen thunder of the waves, beating the rock-bound shore, rung clear and shrill the cry of the night-bird.

The scene, from which the day was fast ending in a night of murky gloom, was wild and dismal.

On the one hand a broken, desolate range of land, dotted here and there by patches of green in a groundwork of dark-brown; on the other an expanse of angry, surf-lashed sea, from whose depths dark-gray cliffs reared their forbidding heads; above, a sky of inky blackness overshadowing sea and land.

Apparently unconscious of the deepening gloom and of the rising storm, two men stood upon the narrow beach, facing each other like two duelists.

In truth, one of them held in his hands a pair of pistols—held them by the barrels while he thrust the butts into the other's face.

As the notes of the whippowil broke upon the scene, he exclaimed:

"There is the cry of the bird again. Why don't you take one of the weapons, Wilfred Morland? We are losing valuable time!"

He was dark-featured, yet handsome, this man who spoke so fiercely, but a latent fire gleamed in his cold, gray eyes. Of medium height, fine physique, polished manners and respectable dress, the man, Acton Marble, could not have been more than twenty-five.

His companion may have been a year or two older. He was taller, broader shouldered, with blue eyes, auburn hair and tawny mustache.

As the other spoke he started back.

"No—no, Mr. Marble; I cannot do it. I have no quarrel with you—"

"Bah! take one of them!" the other hissed, "or prove yourself a coward. Here, quick, so that we shall be ready to fire at the next cry of the bird."

"But, why do you force this upon me?" asked Morland, as he mechanically took one of the pistols and allowed it to hang by his side.

"You should scorn to ask that question, Wilfred Morland, when you know how you have crossed my path."

"Before you came my way was clear, but with your wiles and lying stories you have thwarted my dearest wishes and made of me a mortal foe."

"Both of us cannot live. One must die! I have loaded one of these weapons; the other is empty. You have taken your choice of them, and it is as fair for you as for me. Be ready to fire at the next cry of the bird and take your chance—"

The notes of the whippowil again rung upon the evening air.

Acton Marble stamped his foot with rage.

"Coward!" he cried, "were you as brave to meet the wrath of men as you are to court the smiles of women, this scene had been over ere this. For the last time dare you meet me like a man, Wilfred Morland?"

The words seemed to have little effect upon the other, for he smiled.

"Ha! I see the drift of your anger now," he exclaimed. "My stay at Cliffwood has brought this about. You cannot bear to see me in the company of Lena Riverton."

"You lie!" cried Marble, hotly. "Dastard, take that!" and he struck Morland sharply with the flat of his hand.

Wilfred staggered back, to quickly recover himself, though the marks of the other's hand still crimsoned his cheek.

"Now, dare you meet me?" demanded Marble, hoarsely.

"Yes, ruffian!" replied the aroused Morland. "Select your ground."

A grim smile played upon the sinister countenance of Marble, as they measured off ten paces and wheeled to face each other.

"Fire at the next cry of the bird," he cried, with a ring of triumph in his tone.

It was a trying moment, but an unnatural calmness seemed to rest upon the duelists, while they listened and waited with bated breath for the cry that was to signal the doom of one.

Slowly the moments dragged, while only the thunderous boom of the breakers broke the silence.

The sky grew momentarily blacker; the sea more sullen and angry; but the duelists waited in vain for the fatal warning. As if chained to the spot they stood, neither daring to move.

Had the whippowil forgot its song?

Then, sounding above the tumult of the waves with startling distinctness, was borne to their ears the report of a gun.

They started with surprise, and Morland, whose face was turned in that direction, glanced wildly over the white-capped billows that rose and fell with resistless fury.

Again the boom of the distant signal-call for help blended with the thunder of the elements.

"It is a ship in distress!" gasped Wilfred.

"Curse the ship!" muttered Marble. "You had better look to your own welfare. That bird won't be forever silent."

"Good heavens! look there!" cried Morland, forgetting for the time his precarious situation, and pointing excitedly toward the sea.

The exclamation was so sudden and unexpected that Marble, too, forgot everything else and gazed in the direction pointed out.

As far out upon the waves as could be seen in the gloom, tossed on the stormy waters as lightly as the foam that capped the breakers, rode, in the very teeth of the rising tempest, a boat!

It contained one occupant—a snow-white figure!

Boom—boom—boom! rung out the signal-gun over the storm-driven seas.

The boat with its solitary—

"Whip poor—"

Quick as a flash the duelists turned to meet each other.

The last note of the wild-bird was drowned by the report of a pistol.

With a low cry Wilfred Morland pressed his hand to his side, and, staggering to and fro, fell heavily upon the beach.

The hammer of his own pistol had descended with a dull click, harmless.

A cruel smile played upon Acton Marble's face.

"I will drag the body down by those rocks where the tide will reach it," he said, half-aloud.

This he did, and had barely accomplished his heartless scheme, when the sound of footsteps startled him.

Turning with alarm he saw a man approaching, already within hailing distance.

He seemed very feeble, and as he moved with tottering steps, he leaned heavily upon a staff.

Marble watched him uneasily; and, anxious to meet him as far from the place where lay the body of his victim as possible, he advanced toward the stranger with rapid strides.

"Hello, old man!" he saluted; "this is hardly a fitting night for such as you to be abroad. See! the storm is rising fast."

"I'm used to storms," murmured the other. "But, did you see that boat upon the sea? Who can it be out on such a night?"

"Only a woman, old man!"

"A woman?" gasped the other. "Then my old eyes did not deceive me. A woman? God save her!"

"Don't start so, my aged friend. It was no living—or at least, mortal woman. They call her the Spirit of the Surf. She always appears before a storm."

"Look! she has come in sight again! She seems to be heading for this spot on the shore. In a minute she will tack in another course."

"Ay, ay, sir; and you say she is a spirit—Hark! There is that gun again! Some ship is in peril. My God, how it makes me shudder!" and he shook like an aspen. "Have boats gone out to her rescue?"

"Boats in the face of such a storm?" cried Marble, in evident surprise. "Why, man, you must be crazy. But, pardon me; I see you are a stranger in these parts."

"Ay, ay, sir; I am a stranger here, though the best years of my life were passed on this coast."

They were standing side by side now, gazing out over the broken expanse of angry water.

Marble turned, hoping to get a view of his countenance, but the lower features were completely hidden by a bushy beard, while the cape to his gray coat was so pulled about his head that only a pair of steely gray eyes were visible. His tone betrayed his disappointment.

"I—I do not believe I ever saw you before."

"We forget many whom we meet," answered the old man, evasively. "Besides, I have been away these twenty years."

"Ah, no wonder, then. Your name—what may I call you?"

"My name has changed many times in my life. To-day I am Walf Ranger. Ugh! this raw air pierces to my marrow. I must seek shelter."

"I will go with you," decided Marble quickly, anxious not to lose sight of the old intruder just yet.

It would not do for the man to discover the body of Morland, which lay behind the rocks, quite out of sight, much to his murderer's relief.

"We shall have to part company if you walk like that," declared Ranger, when they had gone a short distance. "You forget my infirmities."

"Pardon me. I was thinking of other matters, and so walked faster than I intended. But, see! we have no time to lose if we would escape the storm. I feel the rain upon my hand now."

"Ay, ay, sir; but I am doing my best. What can have become of that boatman?"

"Woman, you mean."

"True; I had forgotten. Ha! that poor ship keeps up its firing. God pity—'Pon my life, it must be the Sea Jewel! She was due to-day."

Acton Marble started back.

"No, no," he hastened to say. "The Jewel is not due until to-morrow. My brother comes on her—comes home after being abroad ten years."

"For your sake, then, I hope it is not the Sea Jewel in such sore distress. But, hark! what sound is that?"

CHAPTER II.

THE BELL OF WOLAND'S WRECK.

Clang—clang—CLANG!

Clearly the tone of the massive bell rung out on the storm-laden air.

It was closely followed by a distant peal of thunder, telling that the tempest had begun its war.

Then, for the last time, its hoarse sound nearly drowned by the roar of the breakers, was borne to their ears from the ill-fated ship the boom of the signal-gun!

Clang—clang—CLANG! again pealed forth the deep-sounding bell.

"The warning from the good St. Julian!" exclaimed the old man. "Thank Heaven, the ship will be guided safely to harbor!"

"Don't be too sure of that, my friend!" cried Marble, an exultant ring in his tone. "The bell of St. Julian has been silent this many years. Your warning comes from Woland's Wreck. Mind you not that the sound is too far down the coast for St. Julian? Hark! it comes from the Ribs of Death!"

His companion groaned.

"Woland's Wreck—the Ribs of Death!" he repeated, huskily. "Oh, my boy! my—"

A lurid flash of lightning now blinded their eyes, and the quick peal of thunder drowned the old man's quaking tone.

The glare of the elements lit with fearful brilliancy for a moment the stormy scene, to leave it in a gloom all the deeper for the unusual light.

Acton Marble had looked in vain for the boat with its slight occupant.

Then again the brazen throat of the bell sent forth its resonant warning.

Walf Ranger caught his companion by the arm, and his glittering eyes were fixed upon the other's white face.

"That bell!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "What bodes it to yonder ship?"

"Nothing of good," replied the young man, quickly. "But come; let's seek shelter from the storm ere we are drenched to—"

"And do nothing for that poor ship?"

"We can do nothing! It is preposterous to think of it," and Marble attempted to lead him away.

"But we can at least stay the foul fiend's hand that rings that bell! Ha! there it is again!"

"Hold, old friend!" said the other, in alarm, as the old man abruptly left him. "Let me tell you that it is the foul fiend's hand in reality which rings that bell. No mortal being, I dare say, is nearer than you or I!"

Walf Ranger shivered—not from the storm; he was oblivious of that, but a power more potent convulsed his being.

"You jest, when human lives are at stake. You—"

"No jest! Have I not a brother on yonder

ship? But, come with me to the side of that rock; it will break the wind from us; and in a few words I will explain to you the meaning of the ringing of the bell of Woland's Wreck."

Unwillingly the other allowed himself to be led to the designated spot. Night had now completely veiled the scene, while the storm had reached a fury that would have chilled the heart less unkind of its rage.

Beside the huge boulder which overtopped their heads, the twain were well protected from the cutting blasts while only an occasional dash of rain touched their forms.

"The ship has ceased its firing," said Marble. "She has wisely concluded to stay outside the offing, where she is safe unless carelessly handled."

"She has my prayer for her safety!" returned Walf Ranger, solemnly. "Hark! the bell still keeps up its woeful clangor!"

"And will while the storm lasts," assured Marble. "You said you were acquainted here, twenty years ago, old man, then you must know the story of Woland's Wreck."

"No; my stay was very brief. Tell it to me in as few words as possible," he answered, impatiently. "I am anxious to know the worst."

"Listen then. Whew, how the storm rages! I believe the wind is shifting to the north. Stand further back to the right. There, that is better. 'Tis the sea-fiend's own night!"

"Ay, it must have been such a storm as this when the brig Aschope was driven upon these rocks, half a century ago. At any rate, all on board were lost."

"The fate of the Aschope caused the good monks of St. Julian to place a bell on the convent that its warning tone might guide the incoming ships safe to harbor. Were it daylight you might see the old church from the crest of this rock, for the building is standing yet, though sadly in need of repair."

"The bell more than fulfilled its mission, and many were the blessings showered upon the noble men who caused its clear, massive notes to send a thrill of hope to the distressed mariners seeking an entrance to our land-locked harbor along the devious, winding passages."

"Then the good monks passed away, and the old bell hung silent. At irregular intervals, it is true, it sent forth its impressive voice; but, no one seemed to interest himself in the good work, until at last the spiders built their webs across its huge throat undisturbed."

"Several years later the bell disappeared. But its disappearance was not long a mystery. Further down the coast stood Woland's Abbey, as it was called, between which and St. Julian existed a deep rivalry. A dark-faced, evil-minded man was this Woland, despite his sacerdotal garb; and his church was a queer structure, more than half its length being built out over the water, its piers the bowlders that uprear their dark heads from the rugged shore. It stood just below the granite jaws of the fearful trap known as the Ribs of Death."

"The very night following the disappearance of the bell a fearful storm, not unlike this I should say from the description I have heard of it, swept the coast. In the midst of the elemental strife the bell rung out its stirring tones from Woland's Abbey!"

"Before dark a ship had been seen beating up the coast outside the offing, but no one dreamed it would attempt to enter. It may have been driven upon the reefs by the gale, but it is more than likely that the notes of the bell lured it on to attempt the devious passage!"

"Ay, that accursed bell!" cried the old man, for the first time interrupting the speaker. "It did its terrible work! And we all thought it was the bell of St. Julian. But, go on!"

"The doomed vessel, it seemed, bore straight down toward the bell—straight into the Ribs of Death!" resumed Marble. "She was lost, with every soul on board! Her shattered timbers strewed the shore the next morning. The bodies of all those on board were picked up, I think, and given burial just back of the abbey."

"All?" asked Walf Ranger, catching his companion's arm in a vise-like grip. "Did all perish?"

"So report said," replied the young man, in surprise.

"Then report lied, for I was on that ship!"

"Does my grip feel like that of a dead man? But go on with your story. I am impatient to hear the rest. Though the dead are not supposed to speak, they may listen."

Acton Marble was awed into submission. He feared the man beside him, feeling that he was in the presence of a madman.

"There is not much more to tell," he continued. "A swift retribution overtook Woland."

That very night the sea rose so high that a part of his accursed sanctuary was washed away, while he disappeared and was never seen afterward. From that day the place has been called 'Woland's Wreck.'

"But the strangest part of it all is that though the bell sunk in the deep water by one of the big bowlders, and lies there to this night, it always sends forth its startling peals whenever there is a storm! Rung by the foul fiend's own hand, it peals forth its notes of doom on every dark and stormy night, as more than one doomed ship has learned."

"Bah!" cried Ranger, fiercely, pushing him from the rock with a force that sent him out into the blinding tempest. "Do you think that I have come back after twenty-two years to believe such twaddle as that? I am going to silence that bell or die in the attempt!"

Clang! clang! CLANG! rung out the brazen voice as if in defiance of his threat.

Pulling his heavy cape more closely about his head, Walf Ranger strode away into the darkness at a furious pace, seeming to have suddenly thrown off the weight of at least a score of years from his decrepit frame.

"Hold on!" cried Acton Marble, "I would keep you company. It shall not be said that I failed to do my duty when lives are at stake."

"Good! and as you know the country, it may be you can pick a better course than I on such a night as this."

"Follow me, then; walk close in my footsteps, and see that you make no misstep."

Bending his form to the biting blast, and picking his way along as best he could, the young man led his companion down the rugged shore.

Once he spoke.

"Follow exactly in my steps now!" he commanded. "We are on the shelf of a ledge. A misstep will send you into the sea full fifty feet below."

A flash of lightning following his words disclosed only too vividly the truth of his speech.

Walf Ranger, however, gave no indication of fear. With every electric flash he scanned his surroundings with a precision that enabled him to quicken his pace.

Ever and anon the clangor of the bell was heard above the storm, telling them that they were pursuing the right course.

It was nearly half a mile to Woland's Wreck, and to the impatient Ranger it seemed as if they would never reach the spot.

At last Marble paused, saying:

"Now look sharp for the ruins of Woland's Abbey at the next flash. It is straight ahead. The bell is among the bowlders in front of the wreck."

Nothing could be distinguished in the Stygian night, and Ranger waited for a favoring flash. It seemed slow in coming, for minutes were like hours then. The rain beat mercilessly in their faces, while the continual roar of the wind and tide deafened them.

In the midst of their anxious watch Walf Ranger's restless gaze discovered a ruddy light gleaming in the far distance from the course whence they had come.

"See! what light is that?"

Acton Marble saw it for the first time, and a low exclamation left his hueless lips.

"I—I do not know!" he faltered. "It must be that some of the fishermen have started a beacon light. There is the ship's gun again! She is off Specter's Gap. She ignores the bell. Old Neptune himself must be at the helm to pilot her in on such a—"

The looked-for electric gleam cut short his speech, and he closed his eyes to shut out the blinding flash.

Walf Ranger's gray eyes were not closed, however. He saw the shattered ruins of the old abbey, with its naked timbers reaching out over the frowning rocks and foam-capped waters. The wild, broken coast was disclosed to him for a considerable distance; the storm-driven sea tossed and toiled in maddened fury before his gaze. He beheld a scene that would never fade from his memory, but looked in vain for the bell, though its mournful clangor still beat in his ears.

"Do you not notice that it has a muffled sound now that we are near to it?" asked his companion, as if reading his thoughts. "If you will crawl out on yonder point of rock, which you can see at the next flash, you will satisfy yourself that the bell lies in the water below."

Walf Ranger had seen the point indicated, so without delay he cautiously made his way to the place.

"Crawl to the very end, but be careful you do not lose your hold on the slippery stone," cried Marble, in warning.

But the words had barely left his lips when he heard a sharp crash, followed by a flash in the water and a piercing cry.

Marble shouted his companion's name, but no reply returned.

"The old fool has fallen off and is drowned!" he exclaimed. "But it was no fault of mine. Neither can I help him by standing here in this storm. I have had enough for one night. I don't understand the meaning of that beacon. Ugh! how this rain pours down. I must seek shelter."

CHAPTER III.

THE SPIRIT OF THE SURF.

"BOAT, 'o!"

"Whereaway?" shouted the commander of the Sea Jewel as the cry came from the look-out.

"Just off our lee quarter, sir, standing directly in our course."

"What do you make of it?"

"It holds but one person, sir, and that seems to be a woman!"

"A woman? Great fire! I had hoped it was some one to help us out of this condemned scrape. Hand me my glass, Adlon."

"Here, gunner, keep up that firing! Unless some one comes to our aid within ten minutes we are lost. Condemn these waters and all the pilots in Christendom. They—"

A deafening peal of thunder ended the irate skipper's speech. As soon as it had ceased he seized his glass to look for the approaching boat.

If the scene seemed wild and tempestuous upon the shore, it was doubly so on the Sea Jewel, that was groaning and creaking fearfully as it was driven before the tempest.

Again the minute gun sent out its appeal for help, while the vessel plunged more hopelessly than ever.

Its commander had hoped to make port before night should come on, but a strong head-wind had beat dead against him all day, and in strange waters he had missed his calculation.

To add to his discomfiture the storm rose rapidly; and then, hemmed in by the rocks and reefs of Black Ledge Coast, the situation was far from assuring.

Naturally passionate and easily incensed, Captain Morrows was unusually nervous and excited.

The crew, reading in each other's faces dread forebodings of peril, waited impatiently for the reappearance of the boat.

"What do you make of it, captain?" asked the first officer, as a lull in the tempest followed the recent outburst.

"It's a woman, sure! She is dressed in white, too. But, 'pon my soul, she rides the waves like a water witch!"

"Ahoy! There she comes!" cried an old sailor, excitedly, as the strange boat rose on one of the billows into sight to disappear the next moment in the trough of the sea.

"Shiver my timbers, if it ain't the Spirit of the Surf! We are saved!"

"Spirit of Neptune!" thundered Captain Morrows. "It's a ghostly figure which can mean no good to us."

"Mr. Ashby, see that a storm staysail is rigged at once. We are drifting upon the rocks at a fearful rate. Great guns, how furious the gale grows!"

Willing hands sprung to do the bidding of the officer, when the ship bore nobly up against the tempest-lashed sea. But the respite, if it could be called such, must be of short duration.

Lurid flashes now followed each other in rapid succession, accompanied by the deafening crash of near-by thunder that seemed to rend the very air around them, while the billows lashed in wildest fury the surf-bound rocks and reefs upon which, with frightful speed, the wind in its giant power was sweeping the ill-fated brig.

Over all a night of Cimmerian gloom was fast falling like a pall.

In spite of their peril, the approach of the boat was watched with feverish anxiety. Like drowning men catching at a straw they watched and waited.

"It is the Spirit!" exclaimed the old sea-dog as the figure in white reappeared upon the next swell of the upheaved deep.

"She has saved more than one good ship and she will save us."

"Out upon you for a lubber!" roared Captain Morrows. "What can a woman do in a storm like this?"

"Ship ahoy! What ship is that?" rung in a shrill tone above the tumult of the elements.

"The Sea Jewel!" answered the skipper, "lost in these condemned waters! We—"

A peal of thunder drowned his trumpet tone. "Sea Jewel, ahoy!" came from the boat a minute later. "If you wish a pilot, lay to so I can come aboard."

"Not for a woman! Who are you, anyway?" "The Spirit of the Surf! I had come to save you. But, do as you like!"

A mocking laugh was borne to the ears of the distracted seamen.

"See! she is heading back!" cried the old tar, who had previously spoken.

A groan went up from the crew.

Captain Morrows gave utterance to a muttered malediction at his own folly.

"She hesitates! She turns this way!" exclaimed a young man standing beside the skipper. "She points toward the rocks."

Hastily raising his trumpet, Captain Morrows shouted at the full strength of his stentorian lungs:

"Spirit or mortal, if you can save us, come aboard!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

As if propelled by superhuman hands the boat shot alongside.

Light hands seized the grapplings, and with surprising agility the strange pilot gained the deck.

"It is her!" declared old Jack Seabell under his breath. "And she never boards a ship 'cept in desperate cases."

Captain Morrows fixed his piercing gaze upon the girlish form; but his vision fell before the deep-blue eyes that met his with what seemed a supernatural light.

The words upon his lips did away.

One question filled the mind of every sailor present:

Was she spirit or mortal?

Her countenance seemed to bear a spiritual loveliness, while it was as hueless as the white raiment she wore.

"Umph!" exclaimed the bluff skipper, the first to recover his self-possession. "Are you the only pilot they have at Black Ledge, miss?"

"I know nothing of the pilots of Black Ledge," she replied in a tone that thrilled every listener. "But see! there is no time to lose if you wish to reach the harbor. Trust your fate in my hands and you have nothing to fear."

"I doubt it. No girl—"

He was checked in his speech by a blinding flash, followed by a crash more deafening than any before.

It was a moment of terrible suspense.

"For God's sake, Captain Morrows, don't hesitate," cried a clear voice. "Our only hope is in the girl."

It was young Dean Hammond who spoke.

"Go forward, miss," cried Captain Morrows, huskily. "Save us, or, by the soul of Neptune, your own life shall be the forfeit!"

He might have added, as well as all their own.

Unheeding his threat or the looks of wonder from the others, the girl quickly stationed herself upon the fore-yard-arm, from whence her orders were passed along to the helmsman in a clear, ringing tone.

The Sea Jewel was speedily put before the gale, to be borne on at a mad rate to what seemed certain destruction.

Higher and thicker rose the frowning rocks of Death Reef, telling only too plainly that the hidden dangers of the depths were rapidly encompassing all.

Night had now fairly set in, and save the dazzling glare of the lurid flashes, a sickening somberness hung over the storm-riven scene.

Forging its way furiously forward, the gallant ship soon left the open sea behind and plunged in among the towering rocks which spread their forbidding forms on either hand.

The water was here lashed into foam-flecked waves that broke upon the reefs with an ominous roaring and hissing sound.

Feeling the strong vessel trembling beneath the terrible pressure brought to bear upon its timbers, the seamen looked forward with white faces, trying in vain to penetrate the gloom more than the ship's length ahead.

Still, apparently as calm as if danger was unknown, the strange girl pilot stood at her post, directing the ship's course in a confident tone that gave life and courage to the dismayed crew.

As the first rocky point was safely passed, all began to breathe easier, and felt that in her hands their lives were safe.

But singularly enough, not so with Captain Morrows. A brute at heart, he lacked the moral courage of a man.

As he beheld the fearful vortex into which they seemed to be rushing to a certain doom, his rugged face grew ashen in its hue.

He clutched the ship's rail frantically and looking like a madman, he cried:

"We are lost! Girl, you will drive us on the rocks!"

Without heeding his cries, she continued to call out her orders and watched with straining eyes the channel ahead.

At that moment the distant peal of the bell reached their ears.

As its notes fell on the stormy scene, a wild cry rang from Captain Morrows.

"'Tis the bell of St. Julian!" he cried, "we are saved!"

Seeing, the next instant, that the girl-pilot paid no heed to the warning notes, but kept the ship upon her course, ignoring everything save the perils ahead, he shrieked:

"Girl, are you mad? Leave that yard or I'll shoot you!"

Only her white face turned for a moment toward him gave reply, as she cried:

"Hard a-port!"

"Ay, ay! Port it is!"

"Steady—"

With a wild cry upon his ashen lips, Captain Morrows sprang to the helmsman's side thundering:

"Don't mind that girl! Starboard—hard!"

The terrified seaman glanced up, and his grasp loosed upon the spokes, when the ship lurched to the starboard, creaking and groaning in every timber.

"Hard a-port—quick! for your life!" shrieked the sub-pilot, from aloft.

Her tone aroused the helmsman to a sense of his duty, when he tugged at the wheel with frantic energy.

"Fool!" yelled Morrows, "that bell is our only hope!" and, with a powerful blow he felled the seaman to the deck, to seize the spokes in his own giant's grasp and quickly bring the ship half a length on the starboard tack!

A wild cry came from the girl as she realized the sudden change.

"Port hard! or you'll run us on Wracker's Reef! That bell leads to the Ribs of Death! Port! port! I say! or we are all lost!"

CHAPTER IV.

STARTLED WITNESSES.

LIKE the knell of doom the words fell upon the terrified men.

Bewildered, Captain Morrows still bore down upon the starboard tack.

The struggling ship plunged madly forward, trembling from stem to stern as its keel grazed a hidden ledge.

Then a crash, and the ill-headed craft swung half round and for a moment seemed lost.

"Hard a-port!" re-echoed the voice of the Girl Pilot, ringing above the wild tumult.

At that moment, like a halo of hope, the beacon light came streaming over the sea!

A glad cry left the girl's lips.

Gaining his feet with a bound, and seeing the inevitable doom to which his mad commander was consigning them, the helmsman hurled him aside to seize the wheel with almost superhuman power.

"Ay, ay! Port it is!"

"Steady—so!"

"Ay, ay! Steady it is!"

With a mighty effort the gallant vessel righted, and a firm hand at its helm soon wore off from the dangerous reefs, to regain its former course in the channel.

"Light—ho!" cried one of the seamen; and others took up the glad cry.

As Captain Morrows staggered to his feet he seemed to realize his mistake. Then his gaze became fixed upon the beacon fire that burned higher and brighter as the gun sent its answering boom over the sea.

The clangor of the bell was still heard, though the sounds were growing fainter as the ship left further and further to the starboard the point of Woland's Wreck.

The Girl Pilot continued to give her orders as before, while the Sea Jewel fairly flew past the rocks that loomed thick about them.

As one after another of the uprearing rocks were safely passed, officers and crew gained courage.

The orders from the lookout came less frequently until they ceased altogether.

The beacon now beamed brightly near at hand, and the threatening reefs no longer encompassed them.

Though the storm had lost none of its fury, the waters were more placid, and the Sea Jewel sped lightly on into the waters of St. Julian's harbor.

The spell was broken.

Wild shouts rent the air.

"By the eternal night!" cried bluff Captain Morrows, excitedly; "that girl has saved our lives. Where are you, miss?"

But he received no reply; and then it was found that the heroic Girl Pilot had disappeared from the ship!

A few of the sailors declared that they saw her float away into the night, while others as stoutly affirmed that she faded into nothingness!

"It's the way she always goes!" said old Jack Seabell, with a shake of his grizzled head.

In the distance the glimmer of lights from the homes of the fishermen living along the coast struggled into sight, proving that the mainland was not far away.

Leaving the Sea Jewel to make safe anchorage now that she had run that terrible sea-gantlet, we will turn to other scenes.

Cliffwood Mansion, standing on quite an eminence, commanded a broad view of the sea.

At the moment of the opening of our story a pair of eager watchers stood at one of the windows.

They were Alan Royston and his wife, the present incumbents of Cliffwood, the home to which Dean Hammond was then returning on board the storm-tossed Sea Jewel.

And who was Dean Hammond?

Morley Hammond, of Cliffwood, had died when his son Walter was less than a year old. His widow, a couple of years later, married a former lover, Calvin Royston, and by him had a son, Alan.

Walter, not finding his home as pleasant as it might have been made for him, when ten years of age went to the Old Country, where he lived with a distant relative until reaching his majority.

He then sent word that he had married an English lady and was about to return to Cliffwood to live.

Time passed on without bringing to their American home young Hammond and his bride. Then, after an anxious suspense, the tidings of his sudden death reached the dwellers at Cliffwood.

His mother—who perhaps felt conscience-stricken for the ill-treatment of her first-born—did not long outlive the blow.

Nearly three years passed, when Walter Hammond's widow appeared at Cliffwood with Dean, her son. Mrs. Hammond, however, had found another husband, and had lost him. Soon after her arrival she became again a mother, Acton Marble being that son by the second marriage.

Mrs. Marble was kindly received by Alan Royston, her first husband's half-brother; and, strange enough, a little more than a year later, she became Alan's wife. No children blessed that union.

His wife, twice a widow, it must be stated, was a scheming, and wholly-selfish woman, while her excellent husband never found the courage to brook her will.

Of the mother-love for Dean, her first-born, she seemed to have none, while Acton, her second-born, received every attention an indulgent parent could lavish upon him. Perhaps it was because he partook more of her own nature. At any rate, from the day of his birth it was her ambition and resolve that he should be the heir to Cliffwood.

Young Dean, therefore, found the house of his father's childhood even more unhappy than it had been made for his father.

Royston, his step-father, would have had it different, for he did not like the ways of the passionate little tyrant Acton, spoiled as he was, by his mother's indulgence.

At last for Dean's sake, kind-hearted Royston suggested that he be sent abroad "to finish his education," hoping that he would receive a more kindly reception when he should return.

Nothing loth, the mother assented; so little Dean was sent away, coming home only after many years, to meet his nearest of kindred, but as a stranger.

We may now understand the anxiety with which the watchers at Cliffwood kept their vigil at the window.

Royston held in his hand a telescope which he raised often and anxiously to his gaze.

"Can you see anything of the ship?" the wife asked for at least the twentieth time as he gazed long and more earnestly over the sea growing wilder with each succeeding advance of the gale.

"I think I can make her out, at last," he said. "She—"

"Let me take the glass!" Mrs. Royston exclaimed, impatiently. "You act like a wooden man!"

"Don't get excited, Eva," he said, simply. "It is going to be a stormy night—just such a tempest as it was on the night of Woland's wreck."

Snatching the glass from his hand without replying, she looked eagerly over the distant scene.

"It was further to the left, Eva," he ventured as the glass became stationary in her hold. "It was almost in the range of Sharp-face Rock that I thought I saw the vessel."

But, his words fell upon inattentive ears, for her gaze became fixed upon quite a different object.

He wondered what held her attention so closely, and was about to speak again, when she started back with a low cry, and the glass would have fallen to the floor had he not caught it.

Her countenance was colorless, while her breath came in gasps.

"What is the trouble, Eva? Are you ill?" he cried in alarm. "I will ring for a servant."

"No—no, Alan! It is passing away. I shall soon feel better. It was only a fainting spell. You know I am subject to them."

Even if he didn't he was careful not to contradict her, so he silently waited for her to recover.

Shortly she declared she was better, and the color began to return to her face.

Anxious to know what had caused her sudden indisposition, he took up the glass again to scan more closely the sea view.

"Do you see her—in the boat?" Mrs. Royston asked, quickly.

Royston had for the first time seen the boat with its solitary occupant.

He looked surprised, and as her form was brought into plain view by the power of the lens, he thought he had never gazed upon a fairer image. The excitement of her situation, of course, lent her an added interest.

"Who is she?" asked his wife in a low tone.

"Old Neptune's daughter. But, why under the sun is she out there? And she seems to be putting out to sea in the face of the storm. It is madness! She will be lost!"

"Old Neptune's daughter!" repeated his wife, catching only his first words. "You speak in riddles. It must be the Spirit of the Surf of whom I have heard the servants speak."

"Nonsense, Eva!" she is none other than Old Neptune's daughter. You have heard of the old sea dog, Whitehead, who came to St. Julian's a few years since with such a beautiful daughter."

"Oh, yes," and a great load seemed lifted from her mind. "How much she resembles one whom I used to know. Let me see the—"

Hearing a light footstep she turned to meet the gaze of a beautiful maiden of perhaps twenty, coming into the room.

"Forgive me if I intrude," she said in a soft, musical tone, "and I will retire at once. I was so lonely. Mr. Morland and Acton promised to return before this time."

"So they did, and I had quite forgotten them. But come in, Lena. Alan and I were watching the sea; we have such a fine view from this window. There is a boat, too, tossed on the angry waters, with only a girl in it, who seems to be rowing further and further from the shore. It excited me fearfully, and I came near fainting away."

"Yes; come in, Lena," said Royston, who always felt safe in seconding what his wife had said. "Perhaps you would like to take the glass?"

"I thank you, uncle. I always did like to watch the sea in a storm. You are very kind."

Lena Riverton was the child of his only sister, of whom he had been very fond, so when his wife had suggested that she should visit them often, he was only too glad to acquiesce. The truth was, Mrs. Royston had a scheme in mind, which was that Acton should marry her. Everything seemed to be working in favor of her purpose, and his as well, until Wilfred Morland unexpectedly came to Cliffwood.

He was a stranger to all in St. Julian, and, singularly enough, inquired for Walter Hammond. When told that the latter had been dead for many years, he was much distressed, and asked if he had left any children.

"One son," said Mrs. Royston, who could remain silent no longer, "and I am his mother. Any message you have I am ready to receive. Dean, my son, is away from home."

To her astonishment he replied, coolly:

"I have an important message to deliver, but with your permission I will wait until your son returns."

She could do no better than to conceal her

anger, and as graciously as possible submit to his request, though from that moment she chose to consider him her enemy. For what reason she could not tell, but she felt that his coming boded the present occupants of Cliffwood no good. This feeling was greatly heightened when she discovered that he had found favor above Acton in the esteem of Lena. More than that, she dreaded, ay, hated him. Strange, too, into the good graces of her husband he had won his way. But we digress.

Mechanically Lena took the glass from her uncle and carelessly began to survey the sea-bound horizon. Then she allowed her gaze to wander slowly down the rock-girt coast, until as if spellbound her hand did not move—her gaze became riveted upon a startling tableau.

The actors were Wilfred Morland and Acton Marble in the scene we have described.

The former had taken the pistol forced upon him, and the two were defiantly facing each other, waiting for the cry of the whippowill to end the terrible suspense.

With wonderful presence of mind, Lena Riverton maintained her self-possession, while she gazed as if in a dream upon the fateful scene, her heart seeming to cease its beating, her breath to come in quick, faint gasps.

She saw, she thought, only of Wilfred Morland's peril. Until that moment, until seeing him stand there in such deadly danger, she had not known how deeply she loved him.

She wanted to cry out—to call him away. But she was powerless. Mute and motionless she watched them. The suspense to them was lost beside the agony she endured.

Then the blaze from Acton Marble's pistol flashed on the air, and his victim fell!

She uttered a sharp cry and reeled backward as if she would fall.

"Isn't she reckless?" said Mrs. Royston, mistaking the cause of her emotion. "It made me shiver to look at her. I fear, my dear child, it will be too much for your nerves. Come, let's leave Alan to watch her."

"In a moment please, auntie," said Lena with a calmness that surprised herself. "I want to watch her a minute longer."

When she turned back the glass to the fatal scene, Acton Marble was in the act of dragging the body of his victim to the water's edge.

Then Walf Ranger appeared upon the shore; and the twain went away together.

No need for her to gaze longer.

The shadows of night, too, were fast shutting out the view. She handed the glass to her uncle and silently left the room.

"I knew it would be too much for her nerves," exclaimed Mrs. Royston. "You might have known better."

He made no reply as usual.

Finding it was too dark to continue their watch he laid the glass down.

CHAPTER V.

WILD WORK!

LENA went out from the presence of Alan Royston and his wife in a dazed sort of way.

The terrible scene upon the beach had unnerved her.

Was Wilfred Morland dead?

She felt that Acton Marble was his murderer. What should she do?

What could she do?

She longed to speak to some one—to unburden her mind.

To whom?

At first she thought of her uncle; but a moment's consideration showed her the folly of such a course.

Within a few days she had discovered much which startled her as to the relative positions of those whom she had heretofore considered her friends.

She was a brave girl, however, and she was not long in deciding upon her course of action.

She would go to the shore herself and know if there was hope for her lover!

Having come to this decision, she knew no time must be lost.

Night and storm were fast coming on, but she thought not of that.

The tide was rapidly rising, and she feared she would be too late to save him.

Flying to her room, she hastily donned a heavy cloak and hood, not only to protect herself from the inclemency of the weather, but to disguise her identity somewhat.

Knowing that she might need aid to effect her purpose, she next sought one of the men servants, a burly negro who answered to the

name of Robin Hood without possessing any of the mythical hero's prowess.

She knew she could depend upon his assistance.

She found him dozing in the corner of the old kitchen while Dinah was bringing in the wood with which to cook the evening meal.

"Luk hyur, Missus Lena, w'ot fo' yo' trouble dis chile, he so comf'ble like? Bundle ou' in dis hurrycom! Yo' mus' be cl'an daft. I'se reckon dis darky hed planned to be tired all ou' o' breff."

"But you must go, Robin—quick, before Dinah comes back. It is a matter of life and death. Come! here is your hat and coat. Put them on and follow me, please."

"O' coorse, ef yo' say so, missus. I does enny-ting fer yo', though I can't fer my brack soul see w'ot yo' want o' wife and breff," saying which he followed her out of the house.

The wind was now blowing a gale and the rain had begun to fall.

It was so dark that they could not see the shore, though the sullen roar of the breakers was borne in a deafening tumult to their ears.

"Dis gwine fer to be a drefel night, missus. Yo' s'prise me a 'pearin' ou' in de breff o' sich a hurrycom."

Lena led the way with increased speed toward the shore.

The boom of the signal-gun and the regular peals of Woland's bell fell unheeded upon her ears.

One question filled her mind:

"Would she be in time to save him?"

"Whoa dar!" panted old Robin, as with difficulty he kept by the side of his young mistress; "yo' be in orful hurrah and no mistook. How de wind do hooter. I cl'an t'ink de ruf o' my head am blowed off! Missus, whar be yo' go?"

Giving no heed to his incoherent utterances Lena rushed on faster than ever, until at last the scene of the duel between Acton Marble and Wilfred Morland was reached.

The spot was marked too vividly in her mind to have missed it.

In a moment she had gained the little cove between the rocks, where Marble had dragged the body of his victim.

None too soon had she come!

The water already laved his unconscious form.

"Dead! dead!" she moaned, as she gazed into his upturned face with its closed eyes and deathly pallor.

Then unmindful of the tide creeping over him she knelt beside him.

"For de Lor' I'm s'prised!" gasped old Robin, with chattering teeth and shivering form.

"Here, Robin, help me bear him away from the water."

"Lor' sakes, honey, stan' 'side an' let me do it 'lone."

With little apparent effort Robin lifted the insensible man in his arms and bore him to the greensward, where he carefully laid him down.

"I t'ink he lives, missus. Him buzzum tick like old mars'er's watch!"

"Lives!" cried Lena, joyously, and again she bent over him.

"His heart does beat, but, oh, so faintly Robin! And see! he has received a terrible wound. We must not let him lie here in the storm. Oh, Will! I pray your life may be spared."

"Shall I carry 'im up to de ol' plantation, missus?"

"No—no, Robin! not there. Anywhere else out of the storm."

He looked surprised.

"Golly, missus, jess es yo' say. S'pose we take 'im up to old Necktune's? Dat's nearer, suah."

"I think that will do," replied Lena, doubtfully. "Let me help you, Robin."

"Go 'long dar! T'ink dis chile no sprawl ennyway? Me tote 'im."

Robin lifted the wounded man in his strong arms with seeming ease, and followed closely by Lena, he bore him away.

After passing through a narrow strip of woods they came in sight of a fisherman's hovel, in the door of which was standing a small-sized, grizzly-bearded man, gazing earnestly out into the storm.

"See!" cried Robin, as they drew near to the dwelling, "Old Necktune dun' waitin' fo' us!"

He was evidently watching for some one, but not for them.

He did not see them until they were close to his door, and then he started with surprise.

"What has happened?" he asked, with a look of anxiety as he saw Robin's burden.

"My friend here has been wounded," said Lena, quickly, "and as your—"

"Come in," said the old man, hastily, anticipating her wishes. "Lay him on the couch yonder. Is he seriously injured?"

"I fear so. There, Robin, I think that will do. Now we will see to his wound."

"Better let me do that, missus," said Robin. "I've 'fraid so much blood—"

"Don't be alarmed for me, Robin. Do you not see how calm I am? I truly believe there is nothing that would daunt me to-night."

"But see! He breathes more regularly! He opens his eyes! I am so glad. Can you speak to me, Will?"

He raised his hand ever so slightly, and a smile rested on his wan countenance.

The old fisherman had returned to the door. "Do you suffer much pain? He has fainted. His wound is bleeding again."

Robin began at once to bathe the wound, and, assisted by Lena, succeeded in making a creditable job. The wound was deep and they feared dangerous.

The ball had entered the left side just below the heart, and turned from a direct course by striking a bone, it had passed downward to come out a little below on the back.

It had been a close shot, and his life had been spared by only a hair's-breadth.

The amateur surgeons had the wound well bandaged ere the old fisherman turned back to notice them.

"Pardon me," he said, "if I act not the part of a good host. I am nervous on account of the absence of my daughter. She started out to the ship outside, before dark. I could not say her nay, and I pray she may be spared to return. But a worse storm never hung over St. Julian."

He had begun to pace the floor while speaking, and his excitement was fearful.

"Ha! the gun is stopped!" he cried, suddenly pausing at the door to listen intently. "It is silent! That means that she will try to make port. God have mercy upon them! Oh, my child! you have a task upon your hands a man might well shrink from undertaking."

"Ay, the gun is silent; but the bell—the bell! no storm can silence that! It is time that I did my work. I will not fail her."

He seized a brand from the fire as he spoke and rushed out into the night.

Lena and Robin sitting beside the wounded man watched the old fisherman with wonder. His action to them was an enigma. She thought that he must be crazy, and began to fear him.

Unknown to them he had gathered, ere the storm had set in, a pile of brushwood, dried grass, etc., near his door, and to these he now applied his torch.

But, soaked with the rain, these failed to ignite; and sputtering, hissing in his hand, the blaze upon the brand expired.

He grew more nervous, and rushing into the house seized another faggot from the pile to apply it with no better result.

"Must I always fail?" he cried. "Their lives—hers—depend upon me. Ha! I will do it."

Bounding into the house again, he caught up another brand to carry it to the shed adjoining his house.

A minute later a jet of flame sprung up which kindled rapidly.

Lena turned pale as she witnessed his wild work.

Then a gust of wind swept in at the open door extinguishing the sputtering candle leaving them in the dark.

The old fisherman watched with keen delight the burning building, and as the flames leaped higher his joy seemed boundless.

He threw some of the brush upon the fire which hungrily licked them up.

Hark! the report of the ship's gun is heard.

"They see it! they see it!" he cried exultantly. "It will save them! it will save them!"

Utterly lost to the storm which raged about him, tossing his long disbeveled hair in the night air and drenching his tattered garments, he gazed alternately from the fire into the gloom as if by persistent watching he could penetrate its darkness.

Wilfred Morland had again opened his eyes and even spoken in a low tone to Lena something which she failed to understand.

He seemed quite comfortable and she bade him to remain as quiet as possible.

"Whar dey t'ink yo' and me gone? up to de house'n s'pose?" asked Robin with a hard grin upon his dark countenance.

The question startled Lena, for she had not thought of the possibility of their being missed before.

While she hesitated in her reply, the old fisherman rushed into the room with a scared look upon his bronzed face.

"Quick! fly for your lives!" he cried. "The fire has caught upon the house and the building is in flames!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNBIDDEN GUEST.

ACTON MARBLE, when satisfied that Walf Ranger was really drowned, instead of returning toward Cliffwood started toward the ruined abbey.

With considerable difficulty, in the blinding darkness, he reached at last the entrance to the old building.

Threading the dark hall, with which he seemed familiar, he soon found his course stopped by a heavy oaken door yet in a good state of preservation.

Upon giving three peculiar raps and a low whistle a muffled voice from within demanded:

"Who's there?"

"The Spirit of Woland."

"Spirit, give the countersign, else thy uneasy form enters not this sacred abode."

"Nothing venture, nothing gain."

"Good."

A moment later the door swung open and Acton Marble stepped into a dimly-lit apartment, large in its extent, with rows of high-backed seats running across its floor and a finely-mounted desk upon a high platform in front.

A glance was sufficient to show that it was the holy precinct once consecrated to the worship of God, and where the fallen Woland had exhorted his listeners, not one of whom was so great a sinner as himself.

In the corner of the room, now desecrated by the presence of men bent upon evil, were three persons seated at a table, from which the fourth had risen to admit their visitor.

As they recognized the new-comer a murmur of pleasure arose.

"What news, Cap? It must be something unusual to bring you out on such a night."

"So it is, but the foul fiend's own. Boys, we have been betrayed."

"Betrayed!" explained they, leaping to their feet to a man. "Show us the traitor!" and a cutlass flashed in the hand of each.

"'Tis a woman—curses upon her!"

"The Sea Jewel will safely make port, and the prize you are waiting for has slipped through your fingers."

A look of amazement rested upon the brutal faces of the little group.

"Explain yourself, Marble. Is there work for us to do?"

"Too late to talk of work!" sneered the other.

"You know old Whitehead—Old Neptune they call him. Well, his girl for some unaccountable reason went out to-night to pilot the ship in. The old man has started a beacon, and ten to one if the girl does not bring the vessel in. What can be their motive I do not understand, but it's for no ordinary purpose."

The scowl upon the sinister faces of the listeners deepened and bitter maledictions against the brave Girl Pilot were uttered.

"'Tis not the first time either!" growled one.

"Who is this old man and girl?" asked another.

"The gods know," muttered Acton Marble. "He has come to St. Julian a stranger, associates with no one, and is a small, inoffensive-looking man. His girl has the face of an angel, but the heart of a lioness."

"I remember of speaking to the girl once in a jesting tone of her father. Ye stars! you ought to have seen her eyes snap, and her white face turned as black as a thunder-cloud."

"So our game is up this time," said he of the gang, who seemed spokesman, being indeed its leader. "Well, boys, what course is open to us now?"

A long and stormy discussion followed, in which Marble joined only occasionally until at last he said:

"Now I don't want to interfere with your work, but it seems to me you all fail to see the proper course open to you."

They looked up, inquiringly.

"In the first place," continued the arch-schemer, "how many of you are there who can be depended upon every time?"

"Well, besides ourselves," replied the chief, "there are Williams, Morey and Rob Rane, and Black Mike. Don't you say so, boys?"

"To a man," chorused the others.

"That would make eight," declared Marble.

"Too many it seems to me for so small a field."

The four opened their eyes wider than before. "Look here," Marble went on, "it's no use for me to beat round the bush. The game is for you anyway. Then listen," and he lowered his voice to a whisper, but loud enough to be heard distinctly.

"The Sea Jewel will remain at St. Julian's a few days at the most, when she will put to sea again with a full cargo."

"Nothing would be easier for you than to ship as a part of the regular crew, or manage to secrete yourselves on board. Once open sea is reached and—"

He purposely left the sentence unfinished, but its meaning was clearly understood.

It seemed a long time before the others spoke, and Marble trembled lest he had misjudged his men and gone too far. But he was quickly put at ease.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the chief; "just what has been in my mind. A broad field and a merry race for me! Are you with me, boys?"

"But the risk," ventured one.

"Not half what you are running now," interposed Acton Marble. "I see nothing in the way of your success; and the business—work, I should say—properly done and you are rich."

"It's so, boys," said their leader. "I have thought of suggesting such a plan to you. It will be a sure thing."

"Will the others who are not here agree to it?"

"I'll warrant you we can count upon them. So you are ready to take hold? Let each man speak for himself."

"Redlaw?"

"Ready for the work."

"Ambuscade?"

"I reckon ye'll find me on deck."

"And you, Mark Wildbell, I know we can depend upon you."

The dark-faced man smiled.

"I calculate I helped scuttle one ship in my day, and can help send another one to Davy Jones if called on, Cap'n Gilroy."

"Good."

"And that settles it as far as you are concerned," said Marble, finding it hard work to conceal his exultation. "I have no doubt about the others. They must be fools to let such an opportunity slip by."

"They won't," affirmed Gilroy, confidently.

Following this, the details of the plan were discussed.

Finally, Acton Marble, the wily schemer, said:

"It is a pity to let so good a chance of revenge go by. Why not inveigle that girl on board, and once at sea you can feed the sharks with her precious body."

The wretches, hardened as they were, looked abast.

"It will make us a pile of trouble," said Gilroy.

"I will look after the capturing of her. Once she is in your power and there will be no trouble to you."

"Co-rect," replied the chief. "And it will pay an old debt handsomely. What do you say, boys?"

"Oh, we'll leave it with you, cap'n."

"Then that is settled," declared Marble, promptly.

In secret he was gloating over his triumph.

He well knew that his half-brother, Dean Hammond, was intending to go away on the Sea Jewel, and thus by one well-devised plan he would rid himself not only of his enemies but the tools with which he did his work, for Gilroy and his gang would never dare to return to disturb him.

The minor parts of their work were arranged, Acton Marble being careful to enthruse them with all the flattery he dared use.

In the midst of their conversation a low sound fell upon their ears.

"Hist!" warned Gilroy.

"'Twas only the rats," said Mark Wildbell contemptuously.

"It sounded like a footstep," affirmed Gilroy, anxiously.

"Hark! there it is again!" whispered Marble.

"Some one is—"

Before he could finish his sentence a crash sounded over their heads.

They sprung to their feet in alarm just as a portion of the ceiling fell upon them, half-burying them in the ruins.

Before they could recover from their surprise, a man sprung from out of the debris to confront them, apparently as surprised as they.

Acton Marble uttered a sharp cry of terror as he recognized the gray cloak and piercing eyes of Walf Ranger!

CHAPTER VII.

WOLF RANGER'S CHALLENGE.

WOLF RANGER was the first to speak.

"Pardon me, gentlemen—"

"Hew down the dog!" cried Gilroy, brandishing his cutlass and preparing to spring upon the strange comer. "No honest man would be sneaking in where he is not wanted."

"Of course he was listening!" exclaimed Mark Wildbell drawing his own blade.

Redlaw and Ambushade were impatient for the fray to begin.

It looked as though the stranger had fallen into a perilous trap.

If he was alarmed he did not betray the weakness.

He held a strip of board perhaps four feet long in his hands; otherwise he showed no weapon of defense.

He had taken one step backward so that he stood near the wall, thus keeping his foes in front.

Acton Marble was a silent and motionless spectator.

He carried the pistol he had used in the duel with Wilfred Morland. He had been taken too much by surprise, however, to think of using it. His stock of courage was not enough to boast of.

Somehow Gilroy and his gang hesitated about attacking their unwelcome guest. A dangerous light gleamed in his clear gray eyes. Plainly he was no mean foe, though, unarmed, of course he could stand no show with them.

"I am sorry for this scene," he said, coolly, "but upon my honor, gentlemen, I did not dream you were here, and my entrance into this room was as unexpected to me as to you."

"Pray, what were you prowling through the building for, anyway?" growled Gilroy. "I had supposed it was a sacred place not to be broken into by such as you."

Ranger did not even wince at the insulting speech.

"It was my misfortune," he said, calmly, "to be caught out in the storm and what more natural than that I should seek shelter here?"

"As I could not find the door below, I groped my way up the stairs, and while trying to find a corner where I could rest until morning, the floor gave way beneath me and here I am."

"With your kind permission I will gladly leave you."

"Not so fast," gritted the outlaw chief. "I reckon you will have to get our permission before you go."

"Prithee, old man!" cried Acton Marble, speaking for the first time, "how came you here when I supposed you were drowned?"

"I learned to swim when I was quite young, my friend."

Marble uttered an oath.

"By the way," continued the imperturbable man, "you may have noticed that Woland's bell has lost its tongue!"

For the first time they realized that the bell was silent. As they listened in vain for its clangor, their faces grew dark and fierce oaths fell from their lips.

Trembling with rage, Gilroy cried:

"What shall we do with the dog?"

"Hew him down!" answered Mark Wildbell.

"But mayhap he ain't so bad as he seems," ventured Ambushade. "Sides, I don't like the looks of his eye."

"Settle it the old way, and let the majority rule," said Redlaw.

"Let the Cap prepare the slips, then," assented Gilroy.

"I trust you will bear with us a few minutes, for we want to deal fair with you," speaking to Ranger.

"Oh, certainly," he smiled. "I am one of the most accommodating fellows you ever met."

Marble quickly tore a piece of blank paper into five strips, and each man was given one, upon which he wrote what he thought was best to do with the intruder.

When they had finished, Gilroy took the slips to read aloud the messages they bore.

The first favored giving the stranger his freedom; the second, letting him go upon condition he swear eternal secrecy; the fourth advised confinement at least until they could carry out their plans.

The other two, by coincidence or intention, read alike:

"Dead men tell no tales."

"That settles it," declared Gilroy, as if satisfied with the decision. "Now, sirrah, will you

give yourself up, or shall we be obliged to overpower you?"

"In the little town where I was born," said Wolf Ranger, with provoking coolness, "it was always customary to capture the culprit before passing sentence upon him."

While speaking he drew slowly forth from the folds of his cloak a gleaming Damascus blade!

The outlaws stood as if spellbound.

"I see you prefer these to firearms," he continued. "When I was a boy I practiced fencing with a wooden sword. But this one isn't wood, and it has drawn blood from the best swordsman in the Old World. Do you care to run a tilt?"

A stillness so deathlike followed this quiet, bold challenge that the falling of a feather, it seemed, might have been heard.

In the sickly glare of the solitary lamp the countenance of Wolf Ranger could not be plainly seen, though the eyes flashed forth from beneath the slouched rim of his hat with an ominous fire.

He seemed like a man bearing the weight of many years, for his form was bowed and his long, flowing beard was snow-white.

But he stood there as immovable as if hewn from stone.

"Stand aside, boys," said Gilroy, hoarsely. "I'll take some of the conceit from the dog. He'll find that I am no novice with the sword."

"You will kindly allow me to remove my cape," said Ranger in that cool, provoking tone of his.

"Yes," snapped the wrecker: "and rest assured you will never put it on again."

The other offered no reply as he quickly removed the garment, showing a strongly built frame, clad in a close-fitting woolen jacket which allowed him free use of his arms.

Singular enough, too, his form no longer seemed bent, but erect as Gilroy's own.

Acton Marble wondered at this more than the latter, who was impatient to have the affair over.

"Ready?" he hissed.

"Ready," declared Ranger.

The next moment the sharp clash of their swords rung through the old building.

Gilroy was slightly the taller of the two, and he had a little advantage in the length of arm; but these were more than overbalanced by his adversary's superior coolness.

With full confidence in his skill he thought to make quick work of the contest by a bold onset.

Ranger proved himself too wary and expert to be caught off his guard. Dextrously catching the wrecker's weapon upon his own he bore quickly downward till with a sudden wrench he wrested it from his hold.

As it went flying across the room with a sharp, hissing sound, the outlaw gasped:

"Don't strike—spare me!"

"I never touch an unarmed man," replied Ranger. "Wouldst try again?"

"Fires and furies—yes! You won't find me napping this time either."

Redlaw quickly brought him his sword.

After examining it to see that it was still in good trim he announced himself in readiness for the renewal of battle.

He acted more cautiously this time.

He was beginning to think he had caught a Tartar.

Wolf Ranger acted simply upon the defensive, meeting and parrying his thrusts with apparent carelessness, though the other found it impossible to get within his "guard."

Gilroy played low hoping that the other would leave his forearm or front exposed.

Then his fancied opportunity came, when with all the force he could muster he sent his blade straight out from the shoulder.

Quick as the flash itself Wolf Ranger met the weapon midway with his own ringing blade, turning the flying sword aside, with the movement dealing the wrecker a stinging blow upon his swordarm. Before he could recover from the effects of the shock the sharp point of the other's weapon pricked his bosom.

For the third time Gilroy had been at the mercy of his foe and been spared.

Foaming now like an enraged tiger he lost the last atom of control, rushing upon his opponent like a madman.

Wolf Ranger's lips were seen to compress as he saw that it was time for him to act in earnest.

Parrying Gilroy's furious thrust, though not escaping a slight flesh wound, his slender blade seemed to coil itself around the other's more clumsy weapon.

A quick, downward movement and Gilroy's sword snapped in twain!

As the sharp crash rung out, Wolf Ranger's arm shot forward, and with his sword-point fixed upon the wrecker's breast he cried:

"Surrender now, or the worst's your own!"

The outlaw's face was as white as marble as he gasped:

"I surrender!"

"Very well," said Ranger, lowering his weapon, when Gilroy gladly beat a retreat.

The others were amazed, and for a time no one spoke.

Gilroy broke the silence, and his voice was hoarse with passion.

"Cowards! dare ye not strike a blow, that ye stand there like sticks? Hew down the dog for your lives!"

They needed no second bidding.

As the treacherous words trembled upon his leader's lips, Mark Wildbell rushed upon his chief's victor.

Redlaw and Ambushade quickly sprung to his assistance.

Though taken somewhat by surprise, Wolf Ranger deftly turned aside the nervous blow of Wildbell, and the combat waxed hot.

The outlaw was of gigantic frame without being clumsy, but he had sprung into the fray excitedly and played wildly.

His adversary was not long in finding his opportunity of sending the giant out of the field.

As Wildbell fell with a stinging blow, the sword of Redlaw pierced Ranger's side, and he felt the blood gush forth in a stream.

But the blow cost the desperado his life.

Before he could put himself on the defensive, his adversary had given him his death-wound.

With a groan the wrecker reeled backward, and the sword falling from his grasp he sunk beside his stricken companion.

Perhaps the overthrow of the others unnerved Ambushade's arm, for in the twinkling of an eye he felt his sword wrenched from him and sent hurtling across the room to the further corner.

Then, as the sharp point of Wolf Ranger's invincible blade touched his body, he cried for quarter.

The conqueror smiled grimly.

"I disdain to draw the blood of a coward," he said.

"Are you done with me now?" sharply, pointing his reeking sword toward Gilroy.

The outlaw's reply was a volley of curses.

"I do not wait for an answer from such as you!" advancing upon the other. "I—"

"Hold!" exclaimed the cowering wretch. "Man or demon, I have done with you."

"And I can go in peace?"

"Yes."

"And you?" turning to Acton Marble, who had remained a silent and inactive spectator.

"Have no part in this quarrel."

"Then open the door for me."

Marble looked to Gilroy inquiringly.

"Let the dog go. We'll settle with him for this night's work at another time."

Glad to be rid of the strange man's presence, Marble opened the door.

While he was doing this Wolf Ranger put on his cape, and was ready to step out into the night.

"I am sorry for the work I have done but you drove me—"

"Bah! you will hear from me again. Your life shall pay for this hour's work!"

"Set your price and time," said the imperturbable man as he disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEATEN IN HIS OWN GAME.

LENA RIVERTON started up with alarm at the startling announcement made by Old Neptune at the close of Chapter V.

His words were confirmed by the crackling of the flames and the lurid glare they threw into the room.

"Fly!" he repeated. "Lose no time. The house must burn!"

"How can we move Mr. Morland?" she cried, wildly. "Can't the flames be checked?"

The old fisherman wrung his hands crying like a child.

Lena saw that he was helpless.

"Go, Robin! quick! See if nothing can be done."

He had already started toward the door, and before she had finished speaking he had reached the scene of the fire.

The shed connecting the barn with the house was in a light blaze, and the flames had already caught upon the latter building in several places.

The loss of a minute's time would be fatal to the hopes of Robin.

He did not lose it.

An ax lying near at hand was quickly in his powerful grasp, when with herculean blows he sent one post after another from the sills. Tearing off some boards he followed up his work so rapidly that in little more time than we have taken in telling it, he had leveled the building to the ground.

The flames were thus checked, and the drenching rain soon extinguished the patches of fire which had caught upon the house, so that the dwelling was spared.

"I s'pect dar leetle to be afeerd on, Missus Lena," he said, as she stood in the doorway, watching him in his prompt action.

"I am so glad, Robin. You had better come in out of the rain, hadn't—"

"Law sakes! look dar!" he gasped. "A ghost!"

The exclamation from the startled Robin Hood was caused by the appearance of a new actor upon the scene.

It was the brave girl who had piloted the Sea Jewel into port.

She was drenched by the storm and nearly exhausted.

At sight of her the old fisherman became more calm.

"Heaven be praised, my child, that you have returned," he murmured. "I feared lest I should never greet thee again."

"I am with you once more, dear father; and the ship, thanks to your beacon, rides safely into harbor."

"And he, Nyda?"

"Is safe, father, if he is on board."

"May Heaven bless thee, darling, for this night's work, the noblest and bravest ever done by woman!"

"Tut—tut, father. But pray introduce me to these friends; I see that you have visitors."

"Forgive me, for I quite forgot them in my joy."

"This lady is Lena Riverton of Cliffwood; my daughter, Nyda, Miss Riverton. The gentleman I do not know; but he seems in a sorry plight."

The greetings and explanations which followed soon made them friends indeed.

At last Lena knew that she must return to Cliffwood. The old man and his daughter kindly offered to care for Wilfred, who was sleeping quite comfortably, it seemed.

Before she went, they promised to keep his presence there a secret, if possible.

"Never fear but he will have good care," said Nyda, as Lena prepared to leave. "I will cure him up for you, for I am a famous doctor. Come and see us when you can. There, good-night."

Lena reached Cliffwood in safety, and she fancied without having been missed from the house.

It was then nearly midnight, but there was a light burning in the sitting-room, and she saw Mrs. Royston at the window.

The latter was impatiently waiting for the return of her son, who came half an hour later.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, fiercely. "I have had an anxious time waiting for you."

"Important work has detained me, mother. Has he come?"

"I suppose you mean your precious brother; yes, he has come. But what does it mean? I thought—"

"Don't say a word, mother. We have done a good night's work and our triumph is near at hand."

"I do not understand you. He has come! What worse could have befallen us?"

"He will soon go away again, mother—go to never return."

Then he told her of the secret meeting at the old mine, and the plans that were laid, not even omitting the singular appearance of Walf Ranger and the startling scenes that followed.

"I do not understand who that man can be. But after all it does not matter. Men whose words are as certain as death have sworn that he shall die. One of their number fell mortally wounded by his hand, so that their oaths are sealed with blood."

"I have seen a face to-day that startled me, Acton, who is old Neptune and his daughter?"

"I do not know, nor is there any one in St. Julian for aught I have been able to learn, who does. I think they must be vagrants."

"But she resembles one I knew once—a friend of mine."

"A coincidence merely."

"I suppose so; however, I must see her."

"Toen you will have to act promptly for she is likely to leave these parts in a few days—with the sailing of the Sea Jewel."

"Good! I shall feel easier to know that she is not here. I will confess that the sight of her filled my mind with apprehensions."

"By the way, Mr. Royston is feeling uneasy about Wilfred Morland. He has not come."

"Never will," said Acton Marble, coldly, and she understood enough by his tone not to say more.

The following day dawned clear and beautiful, with little to remind one of the stormy night which preceded it.

Dean Hammond rose refreshed and invigorated by sleep and rest after being tossed so long upon the restless sea.

His reception had been more cordial than he had expected. His mother had feigned if not felt great joy over his return and Alan Royston had given him sincerely a father's greeting.

Acton managed to meet him with a show of gladness, though the hand that he extended to his half-brother was as cold and impassionate as ice.

Royston felt great anxiety over the continued absence of Wilfred Morland.

Acton Marble pretended to.

He watched Lena closely to see what effect the announcement of his disappearance would have upon her.

To his surprise and satisfaction she received the intelligence very calmly, saying that he would doubtless return soon with a satisfactory explanation.

Dean met her for the first time that morning. Nor was it an introduction to be lightly forgotten by him.

He had traveled much and seen many pretty faces, to return to his old home heart-whole, there to meet his ideal of a woman.

From that time Acton Marble had another rival for the affections of Lena Riverton.

She gave the young wanderer a cordial greeting, and noted with pleasure the contrast he presented to his half-brother.

But her mind was with the sufferer in the poor fisherman's hut; and she waited impatiently for the time when she could fly to him.

It was past midday ere the opportunity came.

She found Wilfred conscious and more comfortable.

He was able to converse with her, and in his fervent thanks he was profuse for the heroic kindness she had rendered him, to all of which she gave her gentle veto, asking it as a favor that he should not speak of it again.

"I am more than paid in knowing that you are so soon to get well again. You cannot know how much I dislike that wretch."

"He is a bold, unscrupulous man. But, thanks to you and my fair nurse here, I shall be able to thwart his purpose as far as concerns myself. I think I see through his scheming. Ay, how I long to be well again that I may return to Cliffwood. My appearance will be a surprise in more ways than one."

"By the way, has Dean Hammond returned?"

"Yes; and he is such a noble-looking man, so different from Acton Marble."

"I am glad to hear it. I wish him well. I must see him as soon as possible, but I am not strong enough for the interview now."

It was nearly night before Lena thought of returning to Cliffwood.

Unknown to her as she left the humble abode two pairs of eager eyes were watching her.

They belonged to Mrs. Royston and her plotting son.

Determined to see Nyda she had persuaded Acton to come with her, as near as they dared, to the fisherman's hut, hoping to get a view of the girl should she leave the house.

She had not the courage to meet her.

The appearance of Lena at the place startled the precious pair.

"What does it mean?" asked Mrs. Royston, nervously.

"Oh, she took a freak to visit the old hut, I suppose," he replied carelessly, attaching no importance to the act. "You know she is always running off to some out-of-the-way place."

"Perhaps now that she is gone, that girl of Old Neptune's will show herself."

"How nervous I am, my son. What if this should turn out as I fear—"

"Hist! there she comes. Look sharp if you want to see the beauty of the hovel!"

Nyda had stepped out into plain view and stood gazing down the coast, her right hand shading her eyes from the oblique rays of the setting sun.

Her long, silken hair falling loosely over her shapely shoulders, transformed by the sunlight into threads of gold, with a countenance of rare loveliness and firmly outlined in womanly beauty, she presented a dazzling picture to the enraptured gaze of Acton Marble.

"By Jove, I did not realize—"

A low cry from his mother cut short his speech.

He turned in season to see her fall to the earth in a swoon.

"Here's a pretty go," exclaimed he under his breath.

Fortunately for him, Nyda had not heard the cry, and in a minute Mrs. Royston began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"Is she gone?" asked the woman, slowly opening her eyes at last.

"Yes; but confound your weakness! you came near betraying us."

"I could not help it, my son. Oh, take me home."

Half an hour later they entered Cliffwood, feeling that no one had discovered their absence.

Nothing of interest, or at least, worthy of mention, occurred during the next three days.

Acton Marble was relieved to find that Walf Ranger did not re-appear, though his disappearance was a mystery to the wreckers.

However, arrangements were carried out for the fulfillment of their plans.

Now that the time was drawing so near, the Sea Jewel was going to sail on the next day, Marble grew anxious.

Dean Hammond had not changed his original plan, and only that afternoon had told his mother that it was imperative for him to leave on the Sea Jewel. He would return in six months.

She, with a pretext of grief, urged him to take good care of himself and return as soon as possible, not to go away again.

That evening was the time set for Nyda Whitehead's abduction.

There was no moon, and but a few stars, so that the night was favorable for their nefarious purpose.

To see that there was no blunder in the infamous work, Marble accompanied the confederates he had hired for the dastardly deed.

Their plan was to lie in ambush before the house until all was quiet, when they would force an entrance into the house, hoping to capture the girl without arousing the old fisherman.

Perhaps they had been lying in wait an hour when the door was seen to open and Nyda's figure was plainly revealed to them by the light from within.

"Be ready, boys," whispered the nervous Marble; "it looks as though the bird was going to fly into your hands. Make sure work of it and the reward is yours."

"I must keep back, for it won't do for her to see me. Ha! she has gone back into the house."

The door was still ajar, however, and a minute later the maiden reappeared, and pulling her hood forward as if to conceal her countenance, she stepped boldly out into the night.

"Bent on a late errand, I vow," muttered Marble. "She is coming directly toward you! Don't fail now. Follow your instructions to the letter."

With the whispered words he silently retreated a few feet to the favoring shade of a thick clump of bushes.

Unconscious of the danger lying in her path, the maiden hurriedly advanced, until a low crash in the undergrowth startled her.

Before she could understand its meaning or cry out, the desperadoes had reached her side.

She felt a heavy hand placed over her mouth, and in spite of her struggles she was quickly overpowered.

From his concealment Acton Marble witnessed the consummation of his scheme with a fiendish chuckle.

Having captured their victim without any outcry, they speedily left the place, bearing her in their midst.

When they had disappeared from sight, Marble ventured to leave his hiding-place.

Shaking his fist toward the old fisherman's home he muttered, under his breath:

"Ah, old gray-head, I have struck you a blow to-night you may never forget. My triumph is near!"

With the satisfaction of those unhallowed reflections he went home to Cliffwood.

As the Sea Jewel was to weigh anchor at sunrise the following morning, those at the mansion were early astir.

Dean had sent his trunks down to the vessel

day before, so that he had no baggage to look after, and with a hearty good-by he started on foot to the pier.

He was disappointed that Lena had not come to bid him good-by. He lingered as long as he dared, but she did not appear.

"After all, she cares nothing for me," he thought bitterly, and tried to make himself believe that he did not care.

Vain endeavor!

Acton Marble felt a thrill of delight as he noticed her nonappearance.

"That goes to show the true state of affairs," he muttered, with a grim smile of satisfaction. "Oh, I'm all right with her now. And, by Jove! she don't grieve for that Morland as I expected she would. I must have been mistaken, for I don't believe she cared a straw for him."

As far as his nature was capable of affection he loved Lena Riverton. His determination to marry her had strengthened each day, until it had become his ruling purpose.

When an hour and then two had passed since Dean's departure and she did not appear they began to grow anxious.

Mrs. Royston came back from her chamber with the startling announcement that she was not there, had evidently not been there during the night.

A thorough search followed without disclosing any trace of her whereabouts.

Alan Royston was nearly distracted, for he loved her even as if she had been his own child.

His wife was terribly excited, while her son was dumb with astonishment.

Then, as the search continued without avail, a horrible suspicion began to creep into his sluggish brain.

When at last it was given up that she could not be found, he cautiously left Cliffwood to pay a visit to the old fisherman's home.

No need for him to seek admittance, for as he came in sight of the house Nyda was at work about the door, and in the overflow of her spirits she was singing snatches of a love song.

The last particle of color left Acton Marble's face, as he felt that his worst fears had been realized.

Lena Riverton instead of Nyda Whitehead had been abducted!

At first he thought he would hasten to the pier at once to undo the mistake.

The second thought showed him the folly of this.

The Sea Jewel was already four hours out to sea!

He cursed himself and everybody else. He tore his hair and stamped his feet.

One was about as effectual as the other.

Thoroughly exasperated the baffled schemer went back to Cliffwood.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MUTINY.

DEAN HAMMOND could see in the distance the Sea Jewel chafing at its moorings as if impatient to be free, when he was accosted by a voice near at hand, saying:

"A fine morning, my young friend. I take it you, as well as myself, are seeking yonder ship."

Turning with surprise he saw Walf Ranger coming rapidly toward him.

The latter still wore his gray cloak and to Dean he was a stranger.

"Yes; I have engaged passage on her."

"Good, I feared lest I was going to be the only passenger. You are Dean Hammond of Cliffwood I think."

"The same; but you have the advantage of me."

"He is a noble-looking boy," said the stranger aside. Aloud he replied:

"I knew thy father well, so made bold to speak to thee. I am called Walf Ranger."

Gladly did Dean accept the proffered hand, and together they went on board the ship.

"We were beginning to think you were not coming," declared Captain Morrows, with a show of impatience in his tone, and a few minutes later the Sea Jewel moved lazily out of the harbor.

It was a beautiful morning, and the light of the rising sun shone upon the rugged coast-scene with a pleasing effect.

"Cliffwood stands in the shadows," said Ranger, breaking in upon young Hammond's meditations.

He started from his reverie with a look of surprise, for the words seemed in apt keeping with his thoughts.

"The sun will soon dispel its gloom," he quickly replied.

"I hope so," replied the other, fervently. "I

suppose you intend to return to make it your future home?"

"As soon as I can make a flying trip to England. I am tired of this nomadic life and I want to get settled. It is time."

"But you said you knew father. You will favor me if I ask you to speak of him? He died when I was so young that I do not remember him."

It seemed the subject uppermost in Walf Ranger's mind, for he talked long and earnestly.

The cliffs of Specter Gap and the frowning rocks of the winding passage were passed unheeded by them.

So absorbed were they that they hardly noticed the departure of the pilot in his boat, and the fact that the Sea Jewel was at last fairly out to sea.

Ranger was describing his last meeting with Walter Hammond, when one of the seamen, chancing to come that way, met him face to face.

A startling cry dropped from the latter's lips, and even the imperturbable speaker started back with a look of amazement.

He had recognized in the disguised sailor Ambushade the wrecker!

The other had discovered his identity beyond doubt.

Walf Ranger looked puzzled.

"That man's presence bodes this ship no good," he said in a low tone. "We must keep a sharp lookout."

Before noon he had discovered Mark Wildbell among the Jewel's crew, and another he was sure was Gilroy in disguise.

"There is mischief afoot," he whispered, as soon as he found the opportunity. "Let's go below. I want to get out of the sight of those men, for I believe they are watching us."

Dean followed him in silence, hardly knowing what to make of his actions, as the other had had no safe opportunity to make any explanation.

They had barely left the deck, however, when a sharp, piercing cry reached their ears.

Pausing with amazement they listened for its repetition, when the suspense was quickly broken by a ringing cry for help.

There was a womanly sharpness in the voice and it told of fearful anguish.

"Some one is in distress," said Walf Ranger. "It sounded like a woman's voice, but I didn't—"

"Hark! there it is again! I could swear that I know that voice. Who can it be?"

"It seems to come from the skipper's cabin. He went below some time ago."

"Whoever it is she is in sore trouble. Come, I am going to know what it means."

Ranger would fain have stopped him, but the excited man sprang swiftly toward the ship's cabin.

He kept just behind him.

They could soon hear the sounds as of a severe struggle going on, and the coarse, brutal voice of Captain Morrows reached their ears.

"Curse ye! if ye don't stop this outcry I'll kill ye!"

Dean Hammond stopped to hear no more.

Regardless of the consequence he threw himself against the door with all the force he could muster, sending it from its hinges, to rush headlong into the room.

Captain Morrows, who was in the center of the apartment, staggered back with a cry of terror.

The glance of the bold intruder turned from the startled skipper to the terrified maiden, who had retreated to the further corner.

"Why, Lena Riverton! can this be possible?" he cried with surprise.

"Oh, Dean! save me!" she implored, springing to his side.

"Never fear. I will defend you with my life. How is it I find you here?"

"I was seized and borne upon this ship a captive. Then when I broke my bonds this man tried to fasten me again and—"

By this time Captain Morrows had recovered somewhat, and starting forward he cried:

"Dastard, what means this intrusion? Methinks you have forgotten your place. I will see that you suffer for this. Release that girl at once. She is my charge—"

"Hold!" cried Dean, as the other advanced to seize Lena. "Another step at your peril."

But Dean Hammond was unarmed, and the excited officer saw it.

Drawing a pistol, he was about to level it at the young man's head, when Walf Ranger reached the spot.

The latter's sword flashed in his hand as he cried:

"Stand! lift a finger until this affair is explained, and you are a dead man!"

Captain Morrows ground his teeth with rage, but he was too big a coward to speak or move.

At this critical moment some one was heard rushing toward the scene.

"Quick, for your life, captain, come on deck!"

It was the officer of the watch, and he showed great excitement.

"What is it?" gasped the skipper.

"A mutiny!"

"For God's sake, don't delay!"

There was no mistaking the earnestness of his tone, and Walf Ranger stepped quickly aside for the other to pass.

Trembling with fear Captain Morrows followed his subordinate to the deck.

Startling cries were now heard mingled with the reports of fire-arms.

"Perhaps we are needed there," said Ranger. "The girl will be safe here for a short time."

"Yes, Lena; have good courage, and I will return soon," said Dean, following his friend up the companionway.

A wild scene reigned upon the deck.

The ship's crew who had remained faithful had been taken completely by surprise.

The first blow struck had felled the mate to the deck—senseless.

The helmsman was stricken down, and a new hand seized the spokes.

Disconcerted by the treachery of a part of their number, the crew made but futile resistance.

Up from the hatches swarmed the concealed wreckers at a preconcerted signal from their leader, who had succeeded in shipping as a regular hand.

The combined parties of wreckers and mutineers outnumbered two to one the defenders of the ship.

Then Captain Morrows appeared upon the scene, pale and terror-stricken.

"Surrender or die!" thundered Gilroy, brandishing his cutlass over the other's head.

"I am master of this ship now!"

Captain Morrows was too terrified to speak.

"Quick! surrender or die!" repeated the outlaw.

"I surrender!" gasped the startled wretch. "Spare my life."

"Bind the old fool!" exclaimed Gilroy.

"Hail here comes the game we want! Look sharp, boys, that the dog don't escape this time!"

Walf Ranger had gained the deck!

CHAPTER X.

WALKING THE PLANK.

A SINGLE glance from the steely gray eyes revealed to their owner the true situation.

"Be firm, Dean, my boy!" he said, calmly. "We are in for it now."

The wrecker chief, with drawn cutlass, had started toward them.

"Seize them!" he cried, brandishing his weapon above his head.

"By the sword of Woland! we meet again, old man."

Walf Ranger, knowing that his life was in his hand, boldly met his foe, half-way.

Then, as the clash of their steel rung out, the dozen or so of mutineers sprang forward to the assistance of their chief.

"I have a score to settle with the hound!" gritted Gilroy. "Stand back!"

His followers, anxious and excited, watched the conflict with breathless interest.

It was as short as it was fierce.

The chief struck out desperately.

Walf Ranger was not in a mood for trifling.

Defending himself from the lightning-like blows of his foe, he watched with eagle eye for the opportune moment.

Gilroy grew more excited as he failed to draw out his antagonist.

Twice his cool opponent had drawn blood, and he felt his arm weakening.

Great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, and his veins showed like whipcords.

In vain he resorted to every artifice known to him in the feat of arms.

As invincible as ever, the cool swordsman parried his every thrust, pressing him closer and closer to the wall.

"Curses upon your head!" he howled. "I'll—"

The rest was drowned by the clash of their weapons.

At last, grown more reckless, Gilroy blindly thought to run his adversary through by a clear up-stroke.

Lowering his hand for the fatal thrust, his bosom was for the moment unprotected.

Ere he could recover from his mistake, Walf Ranger's glistening blade pierced his body.

With a cry of pain he let the sword fall from his grasp, and sunk to the deck.

A wild cry went up from the on-lookers as they saw their leader go down.

"He has killed the captain!" yelled Mark Wildbell. "Down with him!"

With the horde at his heels the burly desperado hurled himself upon the gallant swordsman.

Dean Hammond instantly caught up the weapon Gilroy had let fall, and sprung to the assistance of his friend.

A wild, confused struggle followed.

A nervous blow from Walf Ranger sent Wildbell to the deck.

Another excited wrecker sprung into his steps to share the same fate.

Dean Hammond had felled one of the ruffians when he received a blow upon the head that rendered him senseless.

Shots were now fired, but fortunately for Ranger they flew wide of him.

He was having his hands full, but he seemed equal to the occasion and swept down the fourth of his assailants.

By this time Mark Wildbell had regained his feet.

"Stand aside, and I'll cut down the tiger!" he yelled, forcing his way through the excited gang, with heavy blade lifted with both hands above his head.

Walf Ranger turned none too soon to meet the giant's attack.

The other's furious blow he caught upon his own slender blade and saved himself.

But so great was the force of the stroke that his sword was broken at the hilt!

The shock nearly threw him down as it did his assailant also.

At that moment a heavy missile came hurtling through the air to strike him upon the head, when he sunk to the deck without a groan.

The fight was now over.

Though dearly paid for, after all, the mutineers had carried their end.

No time was lost in securing Ranger and young Hammond, so that when they returned to consciousness they found themselves prisoners.

Gilroy had received a deep and dangerous wound, but it was thought not a fatal one.

He was promptly cared for, as were the others of their number who had been injured.

One was found to have been killed, and his body was consigned to the sea without the delay of any ceremony.

Captain Morrows and four of his crew were put into bonds.

The others had joined their fortunes with the wreckers or fallen in the fight.

Land was some time since lost sight of so shaking out a full spread of canvas they were borne merrily on before a spanking breeze.

Mark Wildbell was virtually in command.

"What are we to do with the prisoners?" asked Ambushade.

"Keep 'em until the cap'n gets smart enough to decide on their fates. By Heaven! here comes that girl, and I s'posed she was under lock and key. Call Everg and Campton. She may give us trouble."

This last was spoken in a whisper to his confederate, who acted promptly at his bidding.

Lena, unconscious of what had really taken place, and unable to bear the suspense longer, had left the cabin to come on deck.

She started at the sight of the burly Wildbell.

"Where are my friends?" she cried.

"Oh, well enough," he replied, indifferently, waiting for his confederates to appear.

Instinctively Lena had guessed the truth.

"What has happened? Oh, this suspense is worse than—"

"Don't fret," he interrupted. "The ship has changed masters, that is all."

"If by your friends you mean the two passengers, we have just sent them below."

"Then they live—are safe!" she said, with a breath of relief.

"Yes, live and are safe for the time. So you will please return to the cabin."

"I would see them."

By this time Ambushade with two others had reached the spot.

Lena read their intentions.

"No—no! Do not bind me again. Oh, what have I done that you should treat me thus?"

"Girl, what is your name?" asked Wildbell, abruptly.

"Lena Riverton," she replied. "I—"

"Shades of St. Julian! I thought as much," he laughed. "This is a pretty go, Ambu. Do you see the mistake that has been made?"

"By heavens, Mark! I do now. What is to be done?"

"Nothing, of course, now."

Then turning to her, he continued:

"Well, girl, it seems the wrong bird has been caught."

"Now, as I told you, this ship has swapped masters, and instead of that old sneak-face Morrows I'm for the time being scooper of affairs. It's lucky for you, too, for though I'm no better'n a shark, I was always a gentleman where women were concerned."

"If you will go down into the cabin and stay there, we won't bind you. Otherways we shall, true's lightning."

"Do you hear?"

"But where are my—"

"None of your confounded business. I'll have you tied if you open your jaw again! Do you hear that?"

Thinking discretion the better part of valor" Lena returned to the cabin with a feeling of utter helplessness.

Bound hands and feet, Walf Ranger and Dean Hammond had been thrust into the stowaway along with the other prisoners.

As the afternoon waned, however, Gilroy so far recovered from his wound as to inquire for them.

"Curses upon them!" he growled. "I want to see them meet their fate. It is not safe either to allow that infernal Walf Ranger any respite."

"He must die this very hour. Carry me upon deck at once. I would witness the work."

In spite of their remonstrances he insisted upon being obeyed, so that he was carried above and made as comfortable as possible.

But the exertion cost him dear, and it was several minutes ere he could suppress the groans of pain.

As soon as he had somewhat recovered his composure he ordered that the captives be brought on deck.

In answer to the command, Walf and Dean were brought before him, wondering what fate had in store for them.

"So you find that I triumph at last," he greeted, grimly, to which the prisoners made no reply.

"Sirrahs, have you lost your tongues? Methinks thine," nodding to Ranger, "was glib enough a few nights since. Ah, adversity strikes you dumb. Dost guess thy fates?"

"I, for one," replied Walf Ranger, "prefer not to anticipate the future."

"Nor do I marvel at thy obstinacy. Men, bring along a plank. Yes; two of them."

Dean Hammond turned pale as he realized the fate in store for them.

Ranger was more calm, and his gray eyes met the outlaw's gaze unflinchingly, as the latter said:

"You can but read your doom now."

"But you will not condemn the boy to such a fate?" asked Walf Ranger, showing more emotion than was normal with him.

"The same fate awaits you both," declared Gilroy, exultantly, as if enjoying the suspense.

"He never harmed you," continued the other, "and he hardly took part in the fray. Do with me as you choose, only spare his life. He is young and with the bright prospects of his life all before—"

"Bah!" broke in the wrecker chief, "you talk like a child now. What is he, to be spared in preference to yourself?"

"He is younger and has fairer prospects in life."

"Ay," said the other, significantly; "sometimes those very 'fair prospects' work against one."

Dean Hammond seemed to comprehend the words more fully than his companion. But he hastened to say:

"Do not plead for me, Mr. Ranger. I am not afraid to meet any fate. More than that, I do not believe there is a person in the world to whom it matters whether I live or die."

Walf Ranger groaned aloud.

Gilroy smiled, but it was the smile of a demon.

"I know of one who would gladly see you die—one besides myself. But we are losing valuable time. The sun is already setting. Men, run out the planks."

Under the directions of Mark Wildbell, the planks were placed on the ship's rail so that a few pounds' weight would tip them into the sea.

Then the ligatures that bound their lower

limbs were cut and the prisoners were led forward to the fatal planks, with their hands still bound behind them.

As the wrecker chief had said, the sun was setting, its glinting rays casting a golden halo over the sea far and wide.

Instinctively the doomed men glanced over the ocean expanse, hoping that some friendly sail might be in sight—a beacon of hope to them.

But, as far as the vision could extend, not an object dotted the horizon-bounded deep.

Gilroy moved uneasily. He was suffering keenly from his wound.

"Come," he exclaimed to Wildbell, "are you keeping them until I die? 'Tis time this were over."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOOM OF THE SEA JEWEL.

"FORWARD there!" commanded Wildbell to the doomed men.

Mechanically Dean Hammond took the first step upon the fatal plank.

Walf Ranger hesitated. He was the less calm of the two now. His gray eyes sought the countenance of every man present, but in those bleared, hardened visages he saw no beam of mercy.

"Why don't ye move, old graybeard?" growled Wildbell, dealing him a sharp blow.

"We want no laggards here!"

Gilroy chuckled with glee.

"Don't spare him, Mark! So the old fool is a coward, after all."

Ranger turned a wild look upon him. It could be seen that he was suffering terrible agony.

His hands were working convulsively with the ligatures that bound them.

"Give me my freedom and I'll show you how much of a coward I am."

Gilroy laughed.

"By the shades of Woland," he muttered, "this well pays me for my wound. But, move them along, Mark. We have little time to spare. I fear I am not as strong as I thought."

Again Wildbell ordered the doomed men forward.

Dean Hammond silently took another step and lifted his foot for the third time. Only another step lay between him and a watery grave.

He had given up hope, and was offering up a mental prayer to Him who ruleth both sea and land.

Walf Ranger groaned in the agony of spirit as he stepped upon the fatal plank.

Then, as if to keep beside his companion, he quickened his pace and quickly stood over the ship's railing.

Below him sparkled and gleamed in the dying light of the fast-sinking sun, the deep-blue sea, which was so soon to close over him forever.

He looked toward Dean, who was raising his foot for the last step.

"Let me go first, my boy," he said, and there was not a tremor in his voice now. "It is not for myself but you I care. If your life should be spared—"

"Hold there!" cried a ringing voice with womanly sharpness.

The doomed men paused with a wild glance backward.

The outlaws looked aghast at the startling appearance of a new actor upon the scene.

Lena Riverton had rushed upon the deck at this critical moment, to defiantly meet the excited horde, in her outstretched hand a revolver leveled at the shrinking form of Mark Wildbell.

"The first wretch who moves dies!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing and her form quivering with suppressed emotion.

Oaths fell from the lips of the startled desperadoes, but for the first time not one durst move.

Gilroy writhed in agony, and he turned pale and gasped for breath, muttering over inarticulate maledictions.

His followers stood as if spellbound.

"Save yourselves, my friends," cried Lena's clear voice. "The first move made to stop you signs the doom of you burly ruffian!"

Wildbell shook like an aspen.

"Don't move, boys," he gasped. "The she-wolf has it all in her hands now!"

The brave girl showed no sign of fear.

Walf Ranger and Dean needed no second bidding to turn back, though they could hardly realize the sudden reverse of fortune.

Glancing in the direction of the hatchway a warning cry left the lips of the first as he saw one of the mutineers spring upon deck and with cat-like tread rush upon the maiden.

Unconscious of the meaning of Ranger's cry she resolutely faced the gang in front.

Dean saw the foe stealing upon her unawares, and bounded forward to intercept him.

The act caused her to momentarily relax her vigilance, when Wildbell seeing his opportunity sprung forward to seize her.

With one spring Walf Ranger reached him, and though his hands were still pinioned behind him he threw himself against the giant with such force that he felled him to the deck.

Dean had performed a like feat upon the other, and Lena for the time was saved.

But the signal for action had been given.

With wild yells the desperadoes rushed upon the three.

Walf and Dean, bound as they were, stood little show, and in spite of their desperate struggles were soon bound to the deck.

The pistol was hurled from Lena's grasp, and she, too, was quickly overpowered though not without heroic resistance.

"Bind her as you do the others this time," ordered Wildbell.

"Ha! what ails the cap'en?"

Gilroy had fallen back upon the deck to all appearances lifeless.

"He has only fainted," said Ambushade. "His wounds, and the excitement have been too much for him."

"Better carry him below," commanded Wildbell. "And while you are attending to that I will see that these others are cared for—ha-ha!"

"We won't take the trouble to unfasten their feet this time, but just slide them off into the sea!"

A coarse laugh followed his words.

Ere it had died away a startling cry rung upon the scene.

One of the seamen had sprung up from the hold and his face looked ghastly in the twilight as he shrieked:

"Fire! fire! The ship is all on fire!"

No more appalling cry was ever uttered on shipboard.

At that moment, too, as if to corroborate the words of the sailor, a thin wreath of smoke curled lazily up from the hatchways.

"Fire! fire! fire!"

Every tongue seemed to utter the dreadful word, until the ship rung with the startling outcry.

The light wreath of smoke increased to a volume, and it poured up from the companionway as well as the hatches.

A sullen roar now reached their ears!

"Quick! see if the flames cannot be stopped," cried Mark Wildbell, the coolest of the outlaws when the first outbreak had somewhat passed.

"Ambushade, call all the men to your assistance you need."

It was soon found that the fire had caught in the stowage among the combustible matter, and had gained a headway that was likely to baffle all of their efforts to subdue.

"Out with the buckets, men!" thundered Wildbell. "To the pumps! Work, now, if you value your lives!"

The deep rumbling of the flames grew louder and more ominous.

In desperation the men obeyed the wild orders of the commander.

Bucketful after bucketful of water was poured upon the seething fire that like a serpent was insidiously finding its way to the very heart of the ship.

At last Ambushade, his hair and beard singed by the fire, and a haggard look upon his face, leaped up from the hold.

"'Tain't any use!" he gasped to Wildbell. "We can't save the ship."

"Then we must leave it," was the grim response.

"The sooner the better, then. And I see no other course. But the cap'n! What about him?"

"He is little better than a dead man—see! I am master now."

"Give us your orders, Cap'en Wildbell, and we are with you."

A faint cheer went up from the handful of b. onzed and excited men.

All the while the fire could be heard roaring like a volcano deep down in the vessel's hold.

"Launch the life-boat!" ordered Wildbell.

"Lively, there!"

"Here, Morey, see that plenty of provisions and drink are put aboard."

Gladly the crew sprung to do the bidding in their eagerness to leave the burning ship.

"It's too bad," muttered Wildbell, as he glanced wildly around. "But it is our only course."

As to the origin of the fire there had been no time for inquiry.

Gilroy had recovered from his swoon to realize the fate impending the ship.

"Mark!" he cried feebly to his confederate in crime.

The other turned fiercely toward him.

"What! living yet?" he sneered. "'Tis time you were dead!"

"You will save me, Mark?" implored the wretch.

"Little time have we to fool with dead men!" answered the other. "Your race is run. We leave you in the company of your foes!" waving his hand toward our friends, who, bound and helpless, had been silent witnesses to the preceding scenes.

"May my curse rest upon you, Mark Wildbell!" said Gilroy. "It is some satisfaction to know that our ill-gotten prize will do you no good."

"Ta-ta! we are six and half-a-dozen!" laughed Wildbell, hoarsely.

"But I see the boat is launched and so I must bid you a pleasant voyage and farewell."

Gilroy, writhing in the agony of body and mind, tried to gain his feet.

With a groan upon his lips he fell back senseless.

Wildbell uttered a low chuckle as he spurned his unconscious form with his foot.

"His sufferings are over!" he muttered, grimly. "I wish I could say as much for the rest of you."

"Come along, cap'n!" called out Ambushade at this juncture.

"I reckon we can't get off this hulk any too soon. Her in'ards are all afire!"

Without further delay the burly Wildbell with a last look at the doomed ship went over the rail.

A minute later the dip of their oars was heard as the ship's deserters rowed away into the fast-gathering gloom of night.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARK NIGHT UPON THE SEA.

LOUDER and louder grew the crackling and rumbling of the fire, telling that it was making rapid progress in its work of death and destruction.

The captives felt the deck grow warm from the heat below.

From the first they had striven with their bonds in the vain hope that they might gain their freedom.

But the outlaws had done their work securely. While the cords cut deeper into their flesh they could not loosen them a hair's-breadth.

"It's no use!" declared Ranger at last. "We might as well give up first as last."

"It is a terrible fate!" exclaimed Dean. "Would I could spare you its agony, Miss Riverton," he said.

"Never fear for me," she replied with wonderful calmness. "It is no worse for me than you. Then, too, there are those four men in the cabin!"

"Good heavens! I had forgotten them," exclaimed Dean. "Hark! I can hear the cries of the poor wretches now. They will be free from their agony before us."

It was a terrible moment.

Night had now set in, so that save the lurid flashes of light which came up from the fire below the scene was wrapped in darkness.

Gilroy was heard to utter a groan, which told that he had returned again to consciousness.

Then he spoke in a husky tone:

"My God! am I left alone?"

"Not alone," said Walf Ranger, quickly. "You have three here to bear you company over the dark river. From the cries, too, there are others below!"

"Have they—my men—gone?" he asked.

"Yes; the dip of their oars is no longer heard."

"You are bound?"

"Beyond all hope of escape."

What Gilroy said next was not clearly understood, but the name of Mark Wildbell was heard.

"Look here," he said to the anxious prisoners, "my race is run, but before I go, I want to do one good deed. Perhaps I do it to spite those dogs who deserted me."

"Upon one condition I will free you. I have a knife with me."

"And that?" they asked.

"Is that you will throw me into the sea, so that I shall escape death from the fire!"

"You must think—"

"Quick! there is no time to lose. One of you roll here to me and I will cut your bonds. I am too weak to come to you."

Before he had ceased speaking Dean Hammond started toward him.

The conversation had been carried on in a hurried tone, and it was not long before Dean was free.

Taking the knife from Gilroy, he quickly freed Lena and Walf Ranger.

It was an unlooked-for deliverance to them, but even then they had little to hope for.

The conflagration had already leaped up through port-hole and hatchway, fringing the sails with flame, and following the cordage till the rigging shone in the starlight a net-work of fire.

The cries from the imprisoned men were now terrible to hear.

"We cannot leave the ship too soon," exclaimed Walf Ranger.

"You look after the wretches below and I will see to lowering a boat."

Willingly Dean sprung down the companion-way, though the heat was suffocating.

Through the blinding smoke he groped his way, guided in his course by the heart-rending groans of the victims.

He wondered that they had not perished ere this.

Captain Morrows was the first one he reached, and with a few rapid strokes of the knife he cut the ligatures that bound him.

More dead than alive the skipper rushed for the deck.

The air was suffocating and Dean felt that it would take away his breath.

But he succeeded in finding four more of the ship's crew, and in freeing them, when all started for the deck.

Walf Ranger had lowered a boat from the davits and was preparing to let Gilroy down from the ship, against the latter's protestation.

"I don't deserve it!" he said. "Besides I cannot live."

"We are not brutes," answered Ranger; "and you are worth a dozen dead men."

"Think of what I have done against—"

Whatever else he said was unheeded by his rescuers; and the next minute he was safely lowered to the boat, though his groans filled the air.

Lena followed next.

At that moment the fire caught upon the fore-sail, licking with its resplendent tongue the canvas, until from truck to kelson the lofty spar with all its gear was one living sheet of flame.

All had reached the boat but Walf and Dean, they having waited to see the others safe before leaving the doomed ship.

"We ought to have drink and food," said the first, "but the flames have reached the store-room. We must trust in Providence. Come—Hark! what means that?"

A piercing cry from Lena rung on the night air, sounding with startling distinctness above the roar of the elements.

Springing to the rail, they saw that the boat had put off from the burning ship!

Whether the seamen were crazed by the excitement of their situation or believed that all had left the ship was unknown to them.

They shouted for them to "lay to"—to wait for them.

Another cry from Lena alone answered them.

At that moment a stronger gust of windswept over the sea sending the fiery elements higher into the air.

The foremast swayed from side to side. The back-stays and head-gear had been burned off, so there was nothing to hold the tottering mass.

As Walf Ranger hailed the boat the second time the mast swayed heavily to the port, and then with a terrific crash went by the board, sending up a dense volume of smoke and cinders as it swept astern.

"We are fairly left!" said Ranger, as they waited in vain for an answering cry from the boat. "We cannot stay here. We must take to the sea. Are you a good swimmer?"

"Yes."

"Good. We may be able to overtake the boat yet."

"If we don't?"

"May God have mercy upon the girl," said his companion, solemnly.

With Walf Ranger self seemed always to be forgotten.

"Here," he said, to Dean, "keep close to me. Jump as far out as you can—now!"

They had sprung upon the rail, and the next moment their forms shot downward into the depths below.

As they left the ill-fated ship she careened to one side, and for a moment seemed about to capsize.

Then she rallied, and, borne on by the increas-

ing breeze, sent out a long train of glittering sparks which left astern a fiery track.

The mainmast was now enveloped in a sheet of flame. That, too, must soon go by the board.

Walf and Dean came to the surface near together.

The dip of the boatmen's oars could not be heard.

Here was a dilemma.

Whichever way they should swim, it might be in the wrong direction!

However, they struck out in the course first taken by the boat.

They were lusty swimmers, and knew the value of prompt action.

Though it was like battling in a hopeless strife, they pressed boldly ahead out of the course of the burning ship, which was still rushing on, a terrible yet grand spectacle.

The mainmast soon fell crashing over the lee rail, leaving the ship little more than a flame-lit hell.

Away into the darkness of the night, beyond the glistening circle of water, lit to a mid-day brilliancy by the burning wreck, swam the intrepid twain.

Vainly they tried to pierce the gloom of the night, that they might catch a glimpse of the longed-for boat; in vain they listened for the swish of oars or the sound of human voices.

"Must we give up?" exclaimed Walf Ranger, as courage began to fail them.

"Heaven have mercy upon poor Lena River-ton!" said Dean. "We must find them!"

On and on they swam, bearing up in the hopeless struggle with a fortitude that seemed more than mortal.

The burning ship was still seen by its own light, though the orbit of its illumination grew smaller and more dim.

Suddenly the flames leaped higher and the air was filled with flying sparks.

A loud, hissing noise was borne over the water, followed by an ominous swirling and boiling of the sea drowned by a sullen roar.

A minute later darkness settled over the scene, telling plainer than words that the doomed ship had gone down beneath the waves which had closed over it forever.

A feeling of utter loneliness weighed down the spirits of the castaways as they saw the ill-fated wreck sink into its watery grave, to realize more fully than before the hopelessness of their own situation.

"I fear it is no use to keep up longer," said the brave-hearted Walf Ranger at last. "I have faced death too often to be a coward now, but we can only meet our fate like men. At the most we can only keep afloat a few minutes longer."

CHAPTER XIII.

SPIRIT OR MORTAL?

LITTLE wonder if the hearts of the brave men began to fail them.

Adrift at night upon the trackless sea, with only their own strong arms between them and the dark depths of an ocean grave. And the strongest of arms must grow weak at last.

"Is your strength beginning to fail you, my boy?" asked Ranger, after several minutes of silence.

"I must confess that I have gained nothing."

"Keep up your courage a— Hark! that sounds like the swish of the tide against a floating timber. If we should be fortunate enough to run across a loose stick, it would be a god-send to us. 'Pon my word, there is one coming, right into our hands."

Walf Ranger proved correct, for a minute later a floating object came within his reach.

Catching hold of it, he found it to be a loose spar from the lost ship.

"Cheer up, Dean. There, can you get hold of it? Throw your arms over it so your weight will rest upon it. Thanks to a kind Providence, there is hope for us yet."

With the aid of the spar they found that they could keep above the tide with little effort.

They had given up the hope of finding the boat, at least until morning.

Thus they drifted away into the night, going they knew not whither.

Perhaps each moment found them further from the object of their search.

Be it as it might, they were powerless to arrest their fate,

Never did hours drag themselves more wearily away.

Toward midnight the clouds broke away somewhat, but it did not become light enough for them to see for any considerable distance.

A little later they fancied that they heard voices in the darkness to their right.

Eagerly they listened, but with no satisfactory conclusion.

"I could attest that I heard the voice of Mark Wildbell," said Dean.

"I thought so, too, my boy," declared Ranger, wiping the briny water from his lips.

"But I fear it was only our imagination."

"How I long for the morning light!"

"Ay, ay; even the worst would be preferable, it seems, to this suspense."

Nothing more was heard, or thought to be heard, save the ceaseless beating of the sea, until at last the gray light of dawn began to break on the distant horizon.

As the darkness began to die away before the coming day how eagerly they scanned the dreary expanse of water encircling them.

"Alas!" exclaimed Dean, "they are nowhere to be seen!"

"We are alone upon the sea!"

"Have courage," broke in Ranger, more cheerfully. "If I mistake not there is a dark object astern. It looks to me like a boat!"

A glad cry left Dean's lips as he, too, saw the dark outlines of a boat looming up in the semi-darkness less than two hundred fathoms away.

"Boat ahoy!" he shouted joyously.

To their disappointment no response was made to his hail.

"We must be mistaken," said Walf, and they watched the scene with feverish interest as the light slowly dispelled the gloom.

With each moment the object gathered shape, until to their unbounded delight they saw a veritable boat.

"Boat ahoy!" cried Walf Ranger. "Lay to and pick up a couple of castaways."

As before no response was made.

A third time they hailed with no better result.

"There doesn't seem to be a soul on board," said Dean.

"And the boat is drifting with the tide. But that needn't hinder us from taking possession."

"We will wait until it comes a little nearer and then take our chances."

In a few minutes the distance between the boat and themselves had been reduced one half.

Still no one seemed on board of the idle craft.

Without waiting any longer they relinquished the spar and struck out for the boat.

Quickly reaching the latter they seized upon its rail and pulled themselves up out of the water over its side.

Half-way over, when they paused with looks of dismay.

Six or eight men lay in the bottom as motionless as if dead.

At first they thought they were dead.

They recognized them as a portion of Mark Wildbell's party.

Among them lay the burly ruffian as insensible as his confederates.

Empty bottles lying about, as well as other evidences of a night of drinking, told that they were under the stupor of the liquor which they had brought from the Sea Jewel.

"We can do no better than to board now that we have gone so far," said Walf Ranger, "though it is like entering a bornets' nest."

No better course seemed open; in fact, it was that or a wat'ry grave.

"As a precaution we will take away whatever weapons they have," said Walf, "so that our chances with them will not be quite so unequal."

When this had been done and they had secreted the weapons where they could have them for use, Dean took his position at the tiller while his companion took a position in the bows so that they commanded the ends of the boat.

They could only wait further developments then.

Anxiously they scanned the surrounding sea for a sight of the other boat, or the sail of some ship.

Neither broke the monotony of the scene.

Then as the sun crept up the eastern sky, they looked almost continually for the missing boat.

In vain!

They helped themselves to a liberal quantity of the bread and meat which the mutineers had been provident enough to take with them as well as the liquor.

It was nearly noon before the outlaws showed any signs of awawening from their drunken stupor.

"We are in for it now," said Walf. "But show no signs of faltering and I think we will manage to hold our own."

The result was different from what they had expected.

Ambushade was the first to recover.

Starting up on his elbow and rubbing his blood-shot eyes with his other hand, his gaze fell directly upon Walf Ranger.

He stared wildly at him for a minute or so, then closed his eyes, rubbed them, and opened them again.

Still the motionless figure was before him.

"Fore God and marcy!" he ejaculated, "it's him!"

Then as his gaze wandered over his slumbering companions, he discovered Dean Hammond sitting in the stern of the boat as unconcerned as if nothing had happened.

"Gracious earth!" shrieked the frightened wretch, "they've both come!"

Upon this he hit Mark Wildbell a furious punch, crying:

"Git up, cap'in! wake up! Their spooks are here!"

Wildbell had so far recovered from his stupor that he started up at the vigorous blow dealt by his confederate.

"What in—"

"Look there!" cried Ambushade, pointing excitedly to Ranger. "His spook!"

In an instant the other's looks changed.

"Good God!" he gasped, and sunk back in a swoon.

The teeth of Ambushade chattered, and his form shook as if with the ague.

"Man, or spirit," he exclaimed, "speak! I—I—"

But speech failed him.

"Have nothing to fear," replied Walf.

"Though we have come back as from the grave, we will return good for evil and use you well as long as you are true to us."

"We will," answered Ambushade, in a thick, maudlin tone, "s'help m' death!"

Then, as a new idea came into his muddled brain, he caught up one of the bottles of liquor, and, passing it to the other, bantered:

"Hev a swig, old feller! D'ye pile o' good."

But Ranger shook his head at the risk of offending the bewildered seaman.

"Strange chap, old boy; but say, mebbe spooks don't lick, hey?"

Walf Ranger shook his head.

"That settles it!"

And as if to prove the matter still further, he took a liberal portion himself.

Had their situation been one of less horror, it would have been amusing to note the effects of their appearance upon the bewildered and startled wreckers, not one of whom did not think he was gazing upon a veritable visitor from the other world.

Little wonder, either.

One by one they returned to a vague realization of their situation.

Mark Wildbell was the most self-possessed of the gang when he had fairly thrown off the effects of a night of drink.

But not one believed, or could be made to believe that the twain who had come so strangely among them were other than spirits who had come back from the sea to punish them for their wrong-doing in leaving them upon the burning ship.

"Take my hand," said Walf Ranger, "and prove for yourself that I am flesh and blood."

The outlaws shook their heads.

In their dazed state the lawless gang turned to the liquor, beginning to drink deeply in spite of the remonstrances of Walf and Dean.

"Thrunk!" muttered Ambushade. "O' course sich as ye don't want nothin'. We are men, and—hic—hi there, Jim, lemme 'lone!"

"Look there!" cried Dean at this moment; "what is that dark object floating to our leeward?"

Walf Ranger turned from the wrangling sailors to scan the sea upon their right, hoping his companion had discovered the looked-for boat.

Instead he saw what appeared in the distance like a huge log tossed on the billows of the deep.

As they continued to watch the strange object and it gradually grew into a tangible shape, vague fears filled their minds.

It was an upturned boat!

"Ay, my boy," said Walf Ranger, while his voice grew husky. "That is the other boat which put off from the Sea Jewel. It must have met with a mishap, and those on board have heer lost!"

"Then she has perished with the rest!" exclaimed Dean, thinking of poor Lena River-ton.

"Ay, but a more merciful fate than to have been cast into such a crew as this," declared Ranger.

CHAPTER XIV.

SCENES OF HORROR.

"AMEN," said Dean Hammond, solemnly, though his heart throbbed with pain for the brave girl who had met such an untimely fate. So fast had the horrors of the preceding scenes followed each other that nothing seemed quite clear to him.

The drunken sailors paused in their struggles to watch the drifting boat as it floated nearer.

For a time they gazed upon it in silence, then, as it slowly drifted away upon its lonely course, they returned to their drinking and quarreling.

As we have seen, they had taken considerable food from the burning ship, but in their mad haste to escape they had brought off no water!

Walf and Dean soon discovered this to their horror.

Already they were beginning to suffer the terrible pangs of thirst.

There was little chance for them to get any of the liquor now, if they had desired it.

But all thoughts of thirst were banished in the presence of that most horrible demon—drunkenness.

Their brains fired to madness by the liquor they had imbibed, the outlaws renewed their struggles with increased fierceness.

One crowded in another's way, and the two, locked in each other's embrace, rolled in the bottom of the boat.

Walf and Dean had to be continually on the lookout or they would have upset the boat.

At different times three of them fell overboard and were barely saved from drowning.

A little after sunset a fourth, in trying to get a bottle of liquor from another, missed his hold to tumble head-first into the sea.

He was too far overcome with drink to swim, and before his rescue could be effected he had drowned.

His fate somewhat sobered his drunken companions to the relief of the others.

The liquor, too, was now nearly gone.

Night soon crept on shutting out the last rays of hope to the castaways for many weary hours to follow.

One by one the intoxicated sailors fell into a deep drowse. Walf and Dean were still awake not daring to sleep both at a time, and a lonely enough night it was to them.

The sky was thickly studded with stars, but their dim light added to rather than subtracted from the gloom of the ocean expanse stretching away into the boundless space.

"We must get sleep while we can," said Ranger to his companion. "You may take your first turn and I will keep watch."

The night wore away without any change in the situation.

Morning dawned.

Once more the sunlight streamed over the sea.

With feverish visions the castaways scanned the water in the gray light of morn.

Little good.

No sail welcomed their gaze.

Not a speck upon the deep.

The outlaws had slept off somewhat the effects of the liquor, but a demon in a new form was beginning to show itself in their manner.

"God have mercy upon us," cried Mark Wildbell, hoarsely, "or we shall perish. My throat is burning up!"

"So is mine!" exclaimed Ambushade. "Let me have water."

"There is none," replied the one called Spanish Sam.

"Then give me liquor. I must have something to drink."

With a sinister smile upon his sallow face the other handed him a bottle.

Ambushade raised it hastily to his lips, but there was not a drop to moisten them.

"Curse ye!" yelled he, upspringing with a look of rage, "take that for yer impudence!" and he broke the bottle over the other's head.

With a groan Spanish Sam pitched forward into the bottom of the boat—lifeless.

The next moment the sledge-hammer fist of Wildbell felled him beside his victim quite as motionless.

"I'll learn ye!" gritted the giant, his blood-shot eyes glaring fiercely around as if to see who would pick up the challenge.

None of the onlookers offered interference.

After a few minutes Ambushade began to show signs of returning consciousness.

Spanish Sam lay quite still.

"He is dead!" said one.

"Throw him overboard!" ordered Wildbell.

It was done.

Again the half-crazed seamen were awed into sullen submission.

Then as the sun neared the zenith they grew restless again.

The hot rays of the sun seemed to blister their skin.

Not a breath of air fanned their heated and feverish brows.

"Water! water! water!" cried the suffering gang.

Walf and Dean were suffering fearful torture, and they knew that of the outlaws must be worse after their drinking.

"My throat is burning up!" groaned Ambushade. "I must have water or die!"

He laved his brow and touched his lips to the salt-water to find his sufferings increased.

"Why don't you speak?" growled Wildbell, turning upon Walf Ranger, who was prudently remaining quiet.

"I prefer to bear my pain in silence," he replied, calmly.

"He don't know nothin' 'bout it!" muttered one. "Tain't for sich as he to want water. Ef it hadn't been fer 'em we sh'd hev sighted a sail 'fore this!"

This speech had a startling effect upon the mad throng.

"Ay, ay, Sheet-anchor Jack!" exclaimed another, "ye hev hove straight to the mark."

"Put 'em into the sea!"

Others took up the cry.

Dean Hammond unused to scenes of violence turned pale.

Walf Ranger, cool and collected, realized a new danger threatening them.

Wildbell's heavy features became stern and fierce in their expression.

"Ay, ay," he cried, "that's the talk. 'Throw them overboard! I'll take the one in the bow—"

"Not by a long sight!" answered Walf Ranger, defiantly.

"Sit where you are or I'll put a bullet through your brain!"

The giant sunk back with a groan.

Instinctively his hand sought for his own weapon to find that it was gone.

His confederates made the same startling discovery.

Their weapons had been taken from them! They were unarmed!

"Them chaps did it when we slept," declared one Morey. "Ay, and he's got my weepion in his grip now."

The others saw that it was the truth.

The baffled wretches looked first puzzled, then enraged.

Wildbell half-started to his feet, to sink back with a groan as Walf Ranger's finger was seen to press the trigger of the pistol.

"Don't move," warned he. "We mean you no harm, nor do we intend that you shall lay a hand on us."

Mark Wildbell gnashed his teeth.

His confederates were spellbound.

The sun was now directly overhead, and its scorching rays seemed to take away their breath.

"Wal, why don't you shoot me?" gritted Wildbell, when a few minutes had passed without action.

"I don't want your life on my hands," replied Ranger. "Now, look here. If you will promise not to molest us, we will put down our weapons."

"Who's a-touching you?" snarled the giant.

"Do you promise?" asked the other, clearly.

"Ay, ay, man, with my life."

"And the rest of you?"

"Fall in with our cap'en."

"Good."

"Dean, we can lay down our weapons. But it's best to keep on the lookout. At the least show of hostility, shoot the man as you would a vulture."

Thus a short respite was made.

Walf Ranger, however, knew the wretches too well to be thrown off his guard.

Hardly had this compromise been gained, before the old cry of "Water, water!" was heard.

If it was not one thing, it was another.

Thus the afternoon wore away on leaden wings.

The cries of the suffering men grew deeper and more ominous; their countenances more sunken and haggard, their movements more uneasy, more threatening.

Still no sail!

No hope!

Not a breath of air.

No relief!

Then the sun dipped its rim in the glinting sea.

Ambushade rose slowly to his feet—with difficulty—for the ordeal was telling upon him.

"This can't last any longer!" he cried, hoarsely. "There is no sail. In course we needn't look for one! No ship could come up in a dead-calm like this!"

Walf Ranger was looking him in the eye while he was speaking. The wretch shrunk back as if afraid.

"I can't live through another night without something to drink! My throat is all on fire! If I can't have water, I must have blood!"

"Ay, ay, shipmate," chorused the others, "blood! BLOOD! BLOOD!"

As the cry rung upon the air, a knife flashed in Ambushade's hand, and with a wild yell he sprung at the throat of Dean Hammond!

CHAPTER XV.

MARK WILDBELL'S CONFESSION.

CRACK! rung out the sharp report of Walf Ranger's pistol, when the ruffian, Ambushade, fell forward with a groan at the feet of his intended victim.

Howls of rage followed, and the maddened wretches sprung to their feet to throw themselves upon the intrepid twain who had defied them.

"Hold!" thundered Ranger, a pistol gleaming in either hand.

Once more he held at bay the men who seemed like so many demons.

Mark Wildbell had not lifted a finger this time.

With all his failings, he was not one to forget his word.

"Back, men, and let them be. They—"

"But he's killed poor Am!" snarled one.

"Not till the fool had opened the fight. Better let 'em alone, boys," admonished Wildbell.

Again quiet reigned—at least only mutterings of vengeance and looks of hatred came from the horde.

It was rapidly growing dark.

The night of horror had set in.

We shrink from its description.

The body of Ambushade was thrown overboard.

One by one the numbers of the desperadoes were growing less.

Mark Wildbell, his heavy features now stark and stern, looked upon the handful of his confederates with a sorrowful shake of his head.

"Ay, boys," he said, huskily, "we made a big mistake in ever leaving Woland. None of you will ever live to go back."

"An' it all comes o' 'em cusses!" growled Morey.

"Better let 'em alone, however, for they have got the best of us."

Bitter oaths, which sounded like the growls of wild beasts, followed.

Contrary to the previous night, the sky was overcast with threatenings of a storm.

How that haggard set watched and prayed for rain.

The wind had sprung up again.

In the hope of a rainfall the outlaws showed no offer of an uprising until toward midnight the clouds began to break away.

"There won't be any rain!" muttered one.

Then the old cry was revived:

"Water! water! water!"

Mingled with it was the more startling one of "blood!"

Not a man had slept thus far.

No one certainly would sleep then.

Sleep!

The volcano would soon burst forth in all its fury.

Walf Ranger knew it.

Dean Hammond anticipated it.

Mark Wildbell saw it coming, and he put out his hands as if to drive away the storm.

Morey had discovered the knife dropped by Ambushade.

Cautiously he picked it up, and with a furtive glance around him, placed it in his bosom.

Walf Ranger saw the movement, to silently await developments.

He feigned to be watching the sea, though in reality his gray eyes did not leave the wretch.

Toward midnight the sky grew lighter; and then a few stars appeared in the heaven, dispelling the last hope of rain.

Like grim specters the men stared upon each other.

"This is terrible!" groaned one.

"Why need all of us die when one can save the rest?" asked Morey, hoarsely.

His meaning was understood.

Doubtless it was the thought of others expressed in words.

"Who shall it be?" cried one, leaping to his feet.

Wildbell was about to speak, when Morey with a fierce yell sprung toward Walf Ranger, the knife gleaming in his hand.

The latter had expected the attack, and the sharp report of his pistol closely followed the madman's wild cry.

But the bullet flew wide of its mark!

Mark Wildbell leaped forward to intercept the murderer's blow, receiving the knife in his own bosom.

As the blood gushed from the wound he reeled headlong against the amazed wretch, who was pitched head-first into the sea.

Mark Wildbell dropped in the bottom of the boat.

The fate of these two roused the fury of the others, who sprung like demons upon Walf Ranger.

His weapons were not idle.

The crisis had come.

Fiends not men the half-dozen or more pressed upon him, making the scene hideous with their wild yells and bitter imprecations.

The combat was hand-to-hand, not a matter of victory to either it seemed, but a case of extermination.

The wretches struck down each other in their blind fury.

Walf Ranger was crowded back into the bow in spite of his desperate resistance.

Then the talon-like fingers of one were fixed upon his throat.

Dean Hammond sprung to the rescue of his companion.

As he dropped the tiller the boat suddenly losing its control lurched to the leeward, threatening to capsize.

He was knocked from his feet, barely saving himself from going overboard.

The excited ruffians were less fortunate, for at the first plunge of the boat they were pitched en masse into the water.

Dean soon sprung back to his post, and with his hand once more on the tiller the craft regained its usual course.

A few faint cries came from the water, and as soon as possible the boat lay to.

The castaways, however, were too weak to swim any distance, and as the wind was blowing sharply it was impossible to save them. Walf and Dean with the wounded Mark Wildbell were only spared.

"Poor fellows!" exclaimed the last-named, starting up, "it is the best thing that could have happened to them."

"Perhaps so," replied Walf Ranger, who had escaped with only slight scratches.

"But you are wounded. I hope not seriously. I owe my life to you."

"I think the wretch has fixed me," said the giant, his voice growing weaker. "I fear the wound has touched my vitals. If you can stop this flow of blood it may give me a few minutes more."

Walf needed no second request to do this, and as best he could in the starlight he bandaged the wound.

He saw that it was ugly and deep.

"It's no use," declared Wildbell, as he sunk back with a groan. "I am growing weaker fast. I shall not live to see another day."

"Have courage," said Ranger. "A man with your strength does not succumb easily."

"But the drain has been fatal this time. You are very kind after all you have suffered at the hands of our gang."

"I cherish no malice toward my fellow-men in affliction."

"I hope you and your friend may escape. In the death of the rest of us I see the hand of retribution. It is justice."

Little more was said for some time.

Walf Ranger silently lifted the lifeless forms of two of the outlaws from the boat to let them sink into the ocean graves.

Then they drifted on in loneliness, while the stars grew more numerous and brighter, until the sea sparkled in their glimmer.

At last Mark Wildbell roused himself from the lethargy stealing over him.

"My end is almost here," he said, huskily. "Dean Hammond, come nearer to me. Let your friend take the tiller. I have something important to say to you ere I die, and I fear I have delayed it too long now."

Walf quickly relieved him of his duty, while Dean bent over the wounded man wondering what he had to say.

"Raise my head a little, so that I can talk better. There, that will do. Many thanks."

"Do you wonder what I am going to say? It will surprise you; but it is the truth every word

of it. It is to free my mind that I am going to tell. If you escape, it will put you on your guard against enemies."

"Ay, you start now. But you will be more surprised when I tell you that you have enemies in your own home."

"We were hired to kill you by your half-brother, Acton Marble! Yes; he wanted to get you out of the way so that he could get all of the property."

"He abducted Lena Riverton, though Nyda Whitehead was the one he intended to have taken away. He made a mistake somehow, but I do not know how it came about."

The wounded man had spoken hurriedly, without heeding the other's look of amazement.

A fit of coughing interrupted him for a moment.

"I am telling you the truth," resumed he, as soon as he could. "I think your mother favors the scheme of Marble. I have told you enough to put you on your guard. I must speak of something else before my strength fails me."

"Dean Hammond, it is too late to undo the wrong I did your father, but I shall die easier, knowing that I have told you all. It is a short story."

"As you have supposed, I dare say, I am an Englishman by birth, and my younger years were passed on the coast of western England. My companion in those days was Leon Marble: a bold, unscrupulous youth."

"We knew your father, though he would not associate with us. He was all that was noble and manly. There was another, too, whom we often met. His name was Edgar Morland."

"Well, it so happened that your father, Leon Marble and Edgar Morland were rivals for the same girl, Evanan Noble."

"Marble grew desperate and swore by all that was good and bad that he would thwart them. Of course he stood no chance with the beautiful Eva Noble, who was as much above him as it is possible for two in life to be. But if he could not marry her himself, he was determined that the others should not."

"He told me his plans and asked for my assistance, which I gave willingly."

"Whenever we met either of the others, we told him some abusive story we pretended to have heard from his rival, until a feeling of enmity was engendered between them."

"In spite of all we could say, however, your father won the fair Eva and she became his wife—your mother."

"Even then Marble would not give up, but swore that he would have revenge."

"Accordingly we circulated more stories about them, and even pretended to carry a message from Morland to your father. At last our object was accomplished."

"Your father's anger was aroused, and when he met Morland again, hot words passed between them."

"From words they came to blows, and in his passion your father struck down—Forgive me, I should have spared you that part of my story. Pardon me, I might have omitted it."

Dean Hammond was terribly agitated, though he half-believed the speaker was wandering in his mind.

"Go on!" said Walf Ranger, huskily. Unnoticed by them he had been an attentive listener. "It is time he knew."

Mark Wildbell did not seem to heed the interruption, and he continued:

"I was a witness to that fatal meeting, and when your father came away I accused him of murder."

A groan came from Walf Ranger.

"He turned pale and denied it," the narrator went on. "We had a stormy discussion, and in the midst of it I felled him at my feet."

"He did not move, and when I bent over him, to my horror I saw that I had killed him!"

"I fled the spot leaving his body there."

"When I told Marble what I had done he chuckled with glee."

"It's a good day's work," he said. "Here, take this money and leave the country."

"I dared not do otherwise."

"I came to America—to St. Julian."

"Resolving to live a different life I entered the Church, and possessing good language and easy speech I soon became a leader. How I succeeded you may know, for I am Woland!"

Again the speaker paused, a violent fit of coughing checking his speech.

Dean had listened to the strange recital like one in a dream.

"You must know the story of the downfall of Woland," he continued. "After that fatal night I left St. Julian and did not return for many

years. I was then so changed that no one recognized me."

"You may judge of my surprise when I found at the old ruins, the leader of a band of wreckers, my old associate in crime, Leon Marble."

"He now bore the name of Gilroy!"

"I gladly joined my fortunes with his. I need not tell you more. I have lived a dark career, but it is over at last. God have mercy upon my Cain-marked soul."

"I could not—not die, Dean Hammond, without telling the bitter secret I locked in my heart so many years ago."

"It has been a terrible burden to me. It crushed from my life the last spark of manhood I possess—ed. I—am—go—ing! Oh—Walter Hammond, I—I—did—not—mean—to kill—"

While the words trembled upon his pallid lips Walf Ranger had secured the tiller, and springing forward knelt by his side.

"Wilton Saxe," he cried; "you did not kill Walter Hammond!"

The dying man opened his eyes with wonder.

"Not kill—"

"No—no! he lives. I am Walter Hammond!"

CHAPTER XVI.

STARTLING SURPRISES.

"WALTER HAMMOND!" repeated he whom we have known as Mark Wildbell.

"Yes," replied the other. "You do not recognize me, but I am he. I did not dream you were Wilton Saxe, whom I knew so long ago."

"Walter Hammond!" repeated the dying man a second time, and he lifted feebly his hand. "I am dreaming now."

"No—no! I am he."

The other aroused himself enough to say:

"Let me see your face, please. I ought to remember that."

Walf Ranger pulled aside the cape and turned his countenance so the starlight shone directly upon it.

"You would recognize me quicker were this beard removed."

"I see—the eyes—the forehead—they're the same! I can die easier now. Oh, Walter, say that you forgive me!"

"As I hope for forgiveness in my own wrongdoing, so do I freely pardon you, Wilton Saxe. We have both sinned and suffered, I know. But I am glad we have met at last, though we must so soon part. I must soon follow you."

"You may be saved. I hope so."

The other shook his head. Then he turned to Dean, who had been a wondering spectator.

"My son," he said, in a husky tone, "can you take the hand of your father, stained as it is with the blood of a fellow-man? I had intended to keep the disgrace from—"

Dean stopped to hear no more.

With a glad cry he fell into the other's arms, murmuring:

"My father! you have come as one from the grave!"

"So I have, my son, for to you and the world I have been dead these many years. I could not stay away longer, so I came to Cliffwood to watch over you. I did not disclose my identity, for you must remember that I am an outlaw."

"You were not to blame for the death of Edgar Morland," now spoke Wilton Saxe, who had seemed to gain new strength. "Leon Marble and myself drove you and him to do as you did. In the sight of Heaven I believe you are innocent."

Walter Hammond shook his head sorrowfully.

A minute later Wilton Saxe threw up his arms wildly, while he cried out:

"Stand back there, boys! Let the old bell have full sway. Hark! how joyfully its tones ring out. The sea grows wilder! I see a specter on the surf! No—it is—I cannot make it out!"

"His mind wanders," whispered Walter Hammond. "Again he is back to St. Julian on that stormy night when the bell of Woland lured the good ship Aschope to her doom. Hark! reason returns once more."

"Forgive me, Walter Hammond. I did not mean to do it. Oh, the night is so dark—so dark!"

His lips continued to move, but they gave forth no sound.

Then they became set and his countenance rigid.

"He is dead," said Walter Hammond in a low tone. "God have mercy upon his soul."

"You and I, my dear son, alone are left of the old ship."

Leaving the castaways adrift upon the trackless sea, we will return to St. Julian—to Cliffwood.

Lena Riverton's disappearance was a heavy blow to all there, though it fell with varying effect.

Acton Marble, at the very moment of his triumph, was paralyzed by the thought of his terrible mistake. He knew only too well that she would never return. Natures like his, however, do not long bow to such grief. He had succeeded in the main.

His mother was more uneasy. The object of her fears still lived. Her scheming brain was soon devising a plan whereby she could be removed.

Alan Royston was nearly frantic. Day after day he paced his floor, refusing to see any one. He had done all that he could to find some trace of her in vain.

Old Robin Hood, the next morning as soon as it was found that she was missing, stole down to Uncle Neptune's to tell her that she had better return to Cliffwood at once.

His surprise may be imagined when they told him she had left to go home the evening before!

"Fore de Lor' den I'se done kilt her!" he moaned. "She axed me fer ter cum down wid her, when I—dis great, brack, good-fer-nothin' nigger—says I'se dat tired my pore legs drop short off ef I move 'em; an' I'se only dat lazy!"

They tried to comfort him by saying that she would soon return; but when the day passed and others succeeded it without bringing her, they too grew anxious.

Wilfred Morland's agony was keen, and he chafed at his helplessness, yet his recovery was rapid, and at the end of a month he was able to move about with considerable ease.

He had been out of the house but a little—never far from it. He was not prepared to meet Acton Marble yet.

To his surprise he discovered the latter several times in the vicinity of the old fisherman's, and once he had ventured to come to the house on some trivial excuse.

At first, Wilfred thought the villain was looking for him, having learned from old Robin, perhaps, that he was living there. Then a suspicion more startling began to dawn upon his mind.

He was in search of Nyda!

There was no longer any doubt of that when, one afternoon near sunset, he called at the house, and asked her to go to Cliffwood with him.

"My mother wishes to see you," he said in explanation. "It is in regard to Lena," he added as she hesitated.

"Has she been heard from at last?" cried the unsuspecting girl.

"Yes; she is at Cliffwood and joins her entreaty with my mother that you come at once."

Nyda's first thought was to refuse the summons, but she hesitated, and to hesitate says an adage is fatal.

The man seemed honest. Her father was away from home, but she reasoned that she would not be gone long.

"I will go," she answered, "but my stay must be brief."

"Then we will start at once," he urged, trying hard to conceal his exultation.

She quickly donned her hood, and throwing a light shawl over her shoulders, started with him.

Wilfred Morland had not known of this interview, but from the small window where he was sitting he saw her going away from the house in company with a man.

He failed to recognize the latter and wondered who it could be. It seemed the more strange to him as Nyda was not in the habit of leaving her home unless in the company of her father.

She had grown very dear to him during the time he had been there, and he dreaded for the end to come when he must go away.

He had fancied that he loved Lena Riverton, but he awoke now to the realization of having found the ideal of his heart. He could not deny that he loved the fisherman's lovely daughter.

Ay, there was another mystery! She seemed so much above her present surroundings that he fell to wondering if Old Neptune Whitehead had always lived in this humble sphere of life.

Once he had ventured to broach the subject, when he met with such a rebuff that he never cared to mention it again.

They had been very kind to him, and he knew that he owed his life to their faithful care—to them and Lena Riverton.

What had become of her? What did her long-continued disappearance mean?

In the midst of his reflections so mixed with joy and sorrow, his host returned.

"There is a strange ship in the harbor," he said, as soon as entering the house. "They bear startling news, too. The Sea Jewel was lost at sea and every soul on board perished!"

"Where is Nyda? I came home to tell her this. But I must go down to the shore to learn the truth of the case. Oh, God! if it should prove true!"

Never since the night he had set fire to his own house to guide the ill-fated ship into port had he seemed so excited.

"Nyda gone?" he cried, when Wilfred told of her absence. "And you do not even know with whom?"

"No; but here comes old Robin. He seems terribly excited, too."

"Oh, Massa Whitefoot! 'as 'ou don' heerd de news? Woland de debbil 'as cum' bat tu St. Julian!"

"What do you mean?" asked Morland. The old fisherman was too excited to speak.

"De new ship tole it."

"Have you seen anything of Nyda?"

"Fore de Lor' furbig dis brack, good-fer-nothin' nigger, dat's wot I cum' fer to tell yo! Den I hear o' dis Woland—"

"But, what of Nyda?"

"She's at Woodcliff! An' frum de high talk—"

"Nyda at Cliffwood?" cried the old man, wildly. "What shall I do? I must go there at once!"

"Nay," protested Wilfred, quickly, seeing that the other was too much bewildered to act with any decision. "Let me go! I see now; it was that wretch, Acton Marble, who came for her. I was blind. But, it is not too late. Be calm; I will see that no harm befalls her."

"If you will. I am too nervous to act. It has been too much for me."

Wilfred lost no time in starting for Cliffwood, and old Robin accompanied him.

As they reached the mansion loud and angry voices were heard within. The clear, ringing tone of Nyda Whitehead was heard:

"Stand aside, Mr. Marble, and let me go home!" she commanded.

"Not so fast, my fisher-maid!" exclaimed the harsh voice of Acton Marble.

Morland stopped to hear no more. He sprang up the steps and opened the door without ceremony, to enter upon a scene of startling interest.

At sight of him Marble started back as if shot.

Mrs. Royston turned pale and looked wildly around.

"Will, save me!" implored Nyda, springing to his side.

"Never fear!" he answered. "These wretches dare not harm your father."

"What means this?" demanded Marble, recovering his speech. "I had supposed you were dead!"

"Then I am happy to disappoint you. I hope you see your mistake now. Even the bullet of an assassin does not always find its victim. I have been spared, Acton Marble, as you shall learn to your cost."

"This young lady will return to her home with me."

"She may go, but you do not until I know the meaning of this. Stop, dastard," and he drew a pistol to level it at the other's head.

Nyda shrieked and threw herself in front of her preserver.

"Spare him!" she cried.

"Do not fear, my darling," he said, calmly. "I do not fear—"

Great confusion was heard at the door then, and the sound as of many footsteps, and ere the little group had recovered from their surprise the door was flung open and a considerable company crowded into the room.

At the head of the party was Dean Hammond and Lena Riverton, arm in arm!

Behind them came his father, with an unknown lady beside him, whose countenance was radiant with joy.

Next came four stalwart seamen, bearing in their midst the form of the wounded wrecker, Gilroy!

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

MRS. ROYSTON, with a shard cry of terror, swooned, while Acton Marble staggered to the wall, where he remained speechless.

Alan Royston, having heard the confusion, entered the apartment.

Old Robin stood in the hall with chattering teeth and an anxious, scared look upon his dark, honest face.

"Uncle Alan," said Dean Hammond, turning to him, "you will pardon us for this seeming intrusion, but events have taken a singular turn, and the crisis has come as sudden to us as to you."

"What does it mean, Dean? We supposed you were dead."

"We have been into the valley of death, but, thanks to a kind Providence, we have been spared."

He would have said more had not the other caught Lena in his arms, murmuring his joy at her safe return.

In a moment Dean continued:

"Uncle Alan, I trust you need no introduction to father, who comes back to us after these many years as one from the grave. My mother, too, Uncle Alan, whom I think you never met."

It would be difficult to describe that meeting in which joy and surprise were so strangely mingled.

"Curses upon you!" growled Acton Marble.

"What farce is this? Has the sea thrown up its offal? But, I realize that I am not wanted in such precious company, so you will excuse me," and he started toward the door.

"Not yet!" replied Dean Hammond. "You have not learned all there is for you to hear. Your father lies there. He would speak to you ere he dies, and his span of life is almost ended."

"Yes, Acton, my son," said the low voice of the feeble man, who was suffering the keenest agony, "my life has been spared to meet you once more. I have prayed for this that I might, with my dying breath, beseech you to turn from your evil ways."

"All these years have I kept my secret from you, but it is known at last. I suppose it is best so. And your mother, I would speak to her, too."

"Acton, you do not despise your misguided father?"

Like one in a dream the other stood beside him. Then as he saw the tears coursing down the pallid cheeks of his dying parent he bent over him, his hardened nature softened, and these murmured words upon his lips:

"Father, I never thought of this."

By this time Mrs. Royston had recovered, and starting up, she gazed wildly upon the lookers-on, who seemed to her like so many specters.

"Eunice," said the fair woman beside Walter Hammond, "do you remember me after—"

"I remember no one!" exclaimed the baffled schemer. "I suppose you're glad over my misfortune. I—"

But no one heeded her words further.

Walter Hammond had swiftly advanced to Nyda's side, crying:

"My daughter—my long-lost daughter! You have not forgotten your father, Nyda."

In reply she sprang into his arms with a joyful cry.

The explanations that followed necessary for the reader to know may be more briefly told in our own words.

On the morning of the last night described at sea the castaways discovered a sail, and as the ship was bearing directly down upon them they were soon picked up.

They were happy to find on this vessel Lena Riverton and those in her boat, they having been rescued the morning following the fate of the Sea Jewel.

Their boat, however, was lost.

Gilroy was still alive, and when he met Walter Hammond he confessed his crimes and expressed a desire that he might return to St. Julian.

He declared that Mrs. Royston was an impostor. She was his wife, and Acton Marble was his son. They had parted within six months after marriage.

She had been an intimate friend of, and came to Cliffwood as, Evan Noble Hammond to get the property.

He had known that she was there, but for his son's sake had remained silent.

He had not recognized in Walf Ranger his old rival.

Walter Hammond had known a checkered life. After his fatal meeting with Edgar he was forced to flee to the Continent, his wife, of course being obliged to remain behind.

Soon after their son was born, but when the child was less than a year old he was supposed to have lost his life through the carelessness of the nurse, who had taken him down to the sea-shore.

This was really the work of Eunice Marble.

who stole the child to help her carry out her scheme.

Nearly distracted with grief, Mrs. Hammond followed her husband to his hiding-place; and they lived together happily, several years.

The same unfortunate destiny he had known earlier followed him into his exile.

Returning home late one night from his place of business, he was waylaid and nearly killed.

It was six months before he recovered, so as to be able to go to his home. His grief may be imagined when he found that his wife had gone, no one knew whither.

After a vain search for his wife and little one—a daughter which had been born to them in their foreign home—the wild thought possessed him to return to the home of his boyhood.

He was the only one saved from the ship the night of Woland's wreck. An outlaw, he had no wish to make himself known, and with a look at his one-time home he went away, thenceforth to be a wanderer. The thought of this deed, which had driven him into exile, haunted him wherever he went, until at last he learned that his son lived.

Again he came to Cliffwood, and now we can understand his anxiety on that stormy night. Still, though he desired to be near Dean, he did not care to disclose his identity, resolving to let the past be buried. He was dead to the world and as such he wished to remain.

Now comes the most unexpected development.

His wife, supposing him dead, came to America, and eventually to Cliffwood—at least to St. Julian. She longed to see the old home her husband had so often spoken of.

In the disguise of Old Neptune Whitehead, she lived within sight of the home that should have been hers.

Nyda was her daughter, though she knew nothing of her secret until a short time before the Sea Jewel came to St. Julian, when Mrs. Hammond had learned that Dean lived and was coming home.

Their anxiety may also be understood now, on that eventful night. Succeeding events, however, postponed the announcement she had intended to make.

Wilfred Morland was the son of Edgar Morland, whom Walter Hammond had supposed he had killed. But the other recovered in time, to think that he had killed his rival, and it was only a short time before our story opened he had learned the truth.

An invalid himself, he had sent Wilfred to find his one-time friend at Cliffwood.

That was a glad reunion, and the sorrows and sufferings of years were forgotten in the happiness which had come at last.

The misguided Leon Marble was borne to his last resting-place with sincere grief.

Acton Marble and his mother left Cliffwood the next day and their fate is unknown.

In due course of time there was a grand double marriage at Cliffwood, and with the sweet symphony of wedding-bells we bid them all farewell.

(THE END.)

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